

It Starts with the Calf

Handling calves properly the first time leads to better experience the next time.

Story & photo by Troy Smith, field editor

The early guidance and instruction parents provide will influence children throughout their lifetimes. In much the same way, says Montana rancher and stockmanship clinician Curt Pate, the way calves are handled early in their lives will influence the way they respond during subsequent handling.

Pate was joined by Texas A&M's Ron Gill, the 2018 Beef Quality Assurance Educator of the Year, for a stockmanship demonstration of savvy handling of young calves. The session was one of several cattle handling demonstrations offered during the 2018 Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show in Phoenix, Ariz.

Pate advised the producer audience to consider whether their calf-handling methods will have a good or a bad effect on the animals' subsequent behavior and performance. He criticized the prevalent tendency for producers to go too hard and too fast when handling calves.

"It might be especially true of larger operations, but a lot of producers think they have to hurry," lamented Pate. "I advise them to not get too hung up on time. Take the time to do things right."

Pate cited the common practice among producers of filling the alley leading to the calf table during processing. Many times, the alley is too wide, and calves are able to turn



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around. They end up "stacked" in the alley and have to be let out so the process can be restarted. It creates a bad experience for calves fraught with fear and anxiety, and fear and anxiety comes out again the next time calves must be processed. It only gets worse.

Pate said the bad experience trains calves in bad habits, and the stress they experience may have a negative effect on vaccine efficacy and the calves' immune response. He advised producers to try bringing calves to the calf table one at a time. Typically, it doesn't take any longer, and processing may actually go faster.

Vaccine placement

Ron Gill cited the Beef Quality



Assurance (BQA) slogan, "The right way is the only way," and discussed proper placement of injections in the neck area ahead of a calf's shoulder. He warned against delivering injections under the foreleg, due to the danger of injecting vaccine into a lymph node or nerve.

Gill advised producers to give no more than two injections in one side of the neck, and place any additional injections in the other side. He also warned against administering

injectable dewormer in the same side as vaccine injections, saying the dewormer may render vaccine ineffective.

"Work with your veterinarian to develop a program that minimizes the total number of injections given to calves," recommended Gill.

Regarding the best age for castration, Gill and Pate agreed that younger is better, preferably at no more than 3 months of age. For calves of that age, the presenters expressed a preference for castration by knife. Pain associated with knife castration is acute but short-lived, while pain associated with band castration is long-lasting. Banding coupled with a tetanus shot is preferable for older calves. **AJ**

Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.