

Are you aware of the benefits of preconditioning calves?

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by John B. Herrick

A misunderstood term in the cattle industry is preconditioning; yet, as a program, it is changing the industry around to a standardization of management. Lenders and farm managers working with cow-calf producers *should* know some facts about the feeder calf industry. The following startling facts bring this problem into focus:

- Over 80% of all feeder calves produced in the United States originate from herds with less than 50 cows. This is true of states the size of Texas. Many of these herds have inadequate management programs because 50 cows do not exist as an economic entity for a sole income; consequently, other enterprises such as "jobs in town" detract management from improving these small cowherds.

- A high proportion of these herds have an average calf crop of 75 to 85%; the majority of calves weigh near 400 pounds at weaning age (205 days) and many herds have cows calving over a four to five month calving period.

- The majority of these calves are taken from their mothers and immediately enter the channels of trade without being weaned, started on feed, vaccinated, dewormed or degrubbed.

The result? National studies reveal that 2% of all calves and 1½% of all yearlings die after entering the feedlot. Further, 30 to 40% need some type of treatment for various ailments, particularly the Bovine Respiratory Disease Complex (shipping fever) that is triggered by the stresses of movement and feedlot adaptation.

Preconditioning is changing the industry around to a standardization of management.

There is sufficient technology available that the cow-calf producers, properly using all facets of production, can have a 95% calf crop weighing 500 to 600 pounds at weaning. A good many of the top 20% of cow-calf producers are now achieving this goal. They are selling pounds of beef with genetic material and degrees of health that allow the calves to gain well in the feedlot. Feeders want crossbred calves, not short, chuffy animals that finish at a light weight.

The preconditioning program started in Iowa 12 years ago and in 1981, over 600,000 calves were processed. Minnesota, North Dakota, Missouri and Ohio have sizeable programs in action. Similar programs exist in several other states.

The program involves having the calves weaned for 30 days and started on feed, vaccinated three weeks before movement, castrated, dehorned, dewormed, grub treated, implanted and identified with a special tag. These calves are accompanied by a certificate verifying the above.

How's the program going? First, for the cow-calf producer, the vaccinations and other treatments will cost from \$5 to \$7; feed for 30 days will vary in locality, but \$20 to \$25 will cover it in most areas. Records on thousands of calves reveal that they will gain from 40 to 80 pounds during this period. This more than pays the cow-calf man for his efforts. Further, sales of strictly preconditioned calves bring from \$2.50 to \$3 more per 100 pounds.

How does the feeder fare? Records from over 10,000 head of preconditioned calves sold to Iowa cattle feeders reveal a .3% death loss, less than 10% required treatment and the feeders were more satisfied with them. "They started out immediately on feed," "Never had to touch them" and "They had less shrink" are statements from many feeders.

Preconditioning is designed to condition the calf on its production site so the calf can better withstand the stress of movement through the channels of trade leading to the feedlot. It is a management program. Cow-calf men on the program are proud of their product. They don't take the calf from its mother and place it in the channels of trade without processing and following up on the performance of the animals in the feedlot. They quickly adapt to other management programs.

More and more cow-calf producers now are vaccinating their cows before breeding season, castrating and implanting calves the first few days of their life, plus following numerous other recommended programs.

Preconditioning is a management program. It is a program every producer should follow. We can have Grade A milk, certified seed and standards for other agricultural commodities. It's time the cow-calf producer in the United States establish some standards. It's time the cow-calf producers and cattle feeders unify and support a program that's a betterment for the entire industry.

Next time a cattle feeder is seeking advice or a loan from you, ask him these questions: How many head died from the last group he fed? What was the cost of treatment? What was the shrink? How soon did they start on feed? Maybe the best question you can ask—Why not buy some preconditioned cattle?