# Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson,** *Kansas State University*

## Long-term advantages of high-health herds

***Although it would be impossible to prevent all instances of disease or injury in a beef herd, high-health herds benefit from having few animals that require veterinary care and carry those advantages through the life of each animal and into the next generations. It is easy to identify the short-term costs and problems associated with a sick or injured animal — veterinary expenses, decreased weight gain, and possibly reduced likelihood of becoming pregnant or more likelihood of dying, but longer-term costs are easier to miss. Even though cattle that become sick can recover and resume a healthy life, sometimes there are negative carryover effects.***

### It starts at birth

Both cows and calves involved in a difficult birth are more likely to have problems in the following months compared to cows and calves that had an uneventful birth process. Cows that experienced a difficult birth are more likely to have uterine infections and fail to become pregnant, or they become pregnant later in the following breeding season than cows that delivered their calves quickly and without problems.

Calves that survive a difficult birth are less likely to consume enough colostrum and are at greater risk of suffering from scours or pneumonia than calves that had a normal birth. However, the effects of events early in a calf's life don't stop at the time of weaning. Researchers have found calves that experienced a difficult birth or that failed to consume enough colostrum are more likely to have health problems all the way through the feedlot to finishing.

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Cows that maintain good body condition and are healthy through all of pregnancy have a positive impact on their calves due to "fetal programming" that lasts well after the calf is born. Recent research has indicated that poor nourishment of a pregnant cow can lead to calves that exhibit poorer growth, health and carcass characteristics than the calves of cows that maintained good body condition and health throughout pregnancy. Much still needs to be learned about the specific nutrients that have in pregnancy the most impact on the future health and productivity of the calf, but herd health and feeding strategies that focus on maintaining healthy cows in good body condition help to assure the long-term health of both the cow and her calf.

Bovine respiratory disease (BRD) is a significant health problem for stocker and feedlot cattle. Although some cattle that experience BRD catch up with their penmates and have good weight gain and carcass performance, as a group, cattle that experience BRD at any time in the feedlot don't perform as well as healthy cattle. These negative effects can occur even though the cattle recover and resume normal feed intake.

Herds that most successfully achieve high health status benefit from the obvious reductions in disease treatment and death loss, but these herds also benefit from subtle advantages that accumulate over time. In addition to good genetic programs and feeding strategies, herds that emphasize good health profit from superior weight gain, pregnancy success and less disease risk later in life.

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