

When 'Unweaned' is OK

Weaning ranch-direct at the feedyard can work — with enough communication.

by Jill Dunkel

Everybody knows weaned and preconditioned cattle will outperform unweaned calves in the feedyard and on the rail, right? Not always.

In the commodity world, it's still a fair bet, but recent data suggest weaning "on the truck" may work best when that event is well-planned.

An analysis of data on 54,000 Angus-type calves fed at Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner feedyards since 2008 turned up the surprising facts.

Comparing unweaned to calves weaned less than 45 days and more than 45 days, those weaned the longest at placement had the poorest quality grades in the end. They were still good cattle, at 34% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and Prime, but the unweaned came in at nearly 49% CAB and Prime.

Of course, the unweaned calves arrived lighter, and they finished heavier only because of more days on feed. They still beat the cost of gain of their weaned counterparts at 76¢ per pound (lb.) compared to 86¢ per lb. for the weaned calves. Their mortality rate was lower, too.

Communication key

Those statistics could make a cattle feeder scratch his head, but visiting with the



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CAB partners who fed a large share of the unweaned calves reveals the secret behind their success is simply communication with the source.

"We work directly with the ranches on their vaccine programs," says Tom Williams of Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot. "We try to get those calves immunized, and we look at their mineral program, too. If they're on a solid, chelated mineral program, the vaccine response improves."

One-on-one conversations with the rancher help Williams understand what health and nutrition program is in place and what he might suggest to improve it at the ranch before the calves ever set a hoof in the feedyard.

The surprise quality and performance advantage of these unweaned calves sends a message to ranchers who are unable to wean and precondition at home: The high-quality beef target and premiums are reachable through close coordination with feedlot partners.

"We want to have a handle on what the calves' immune system is like when they show up," Williams says. "It's an education process with our ranchers. We have pretty good

success feeding and selling on a grid. And the ranchers have better genetics; that's part of it, too."

Picky about vaccinations

Anne Burkholder of Cozad, Neb., also says communication is key to her success, and she suggests standards for ranches to follow.

"I'm picky about vaccination protocols. I've got my cow-calf guys trained. They call me and ask what I want them to give their calves. We talk about getting several doses of a good modified-live vaccine on board, and I ask them to give two clostridials, as well. I also require a pasteurella. If I give these at the feedyard, we don't get near as good of a response," she says. "So I'm very picky about what vaccines those calves have before coming to the yard."

Burkholder only weans ranch-direct calves that are within a two- to three-hour drive from her yard, Will Feed Inc.

"The calf comes directly from the ranch of origin to the feedyard," she says. "There's no stop in the middle. We know there's going to be weaning stress, so we've got to minimize everything else."

Burkholder uses an exercise and acclimation program of moving calves to and from the home pen daily until the calves become comfortable in their new home. Each time she walks the herd out of their pen, feed is placed in the bunk, so the returning calves associate their home pen with feed and



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comfort. It also gives Burkholder another opportunity to watch the calves' behavior and check for sickness.

"It's a lot of work to wean in the feedyard, but it doesn't surprise me that some animals perform better weaned here," she says, in comparison to calves weaned on the ranch. "Some are going to pull animals off the cow and put them in a pen. They'll get fed once a day, and probably won't get looked at again because there's other business to take care of.

"We feed cattle. That's all we do. While there is less stress at home because they haven't been hauled and there are probably fewer bugs, they might not get checked as often and feed delivery may not be as precise."

Burkholder also believes pen conditions could be better at a feedyard compared to a farm lot. "Some don't have good drainage around the barn, or they're trying to wean in a little pen back behind the shed. We clean pens on a regular basis because I don't want to feed cattle in the mud."

Distance is not such a limiter to Williams. He weans calves from 15 different states, but insists the advantage is knowing their health status before they reach the feedyard, and that they came direct from the ranch.

"We've got a real advantage because of that direct line when they come from the ranch," Williams says. "They are not commingled



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before they get here. Each set of ranch calves can be a different situation; it's not a blanket deal. We work pretty hard with the rancher, especially if we've fed the calves before and know how they responded in the past."

Some of the calves recorded in the CAB placement data as unweaned come from early-weaning programs, which have been shown to produce excellent beef quality. Those are part of the mix at Chappell Feedlot, as well.

On the other hand, many of the longer-weaned calves fed at all CAB partner yards came through auction markets or were not part of a coordinated plan with the yard. That suggests feedlot and carcass performance, regardless of weaning program, can benefit from more communication.



Editor's Note: Jill Dunkel is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC.