

Get a Healthy Head



Georgia producer meets weaning health challenges head on.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*

Harvey Lemmon is not one to wait until the last minute to throw together a management program. Weaning, or at least the health part, starts on his operation before the calves are even conceived. The results are hard to beat. Out of the 300 or so home-raised purebreds he weans annually, maybe 1% need treatment for weaning-related health woes.

The Woodbury, Ga., Angus breeder says, "We don't have near as much sickness as we used to. We think it may be because we have vaccinated the cows for so many years."

The cow vaccinations and the first vaccinations for their nursing calves are administered at the same time. On the January- and February-born calves, that's at least three weeks prior to the April 1 start of the breeding season. With the September-October calves, it is three weeks or more before the Dec. 1 breeding season.

The cows get a modified-live-virus (MLV) vaccine for the respiratory diseases [infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) and bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV)], a seven-way blackleg, and a lepto-vibrio vaccine. They are also dewormed. The 60- to 90-day-old calves get their first MLV vaccination for the respiratory diseases and their blackleg

vaccination, as well as their first deworming. Then they go back out with their dams.

At weaning, the calves are weighed and receive a respiratory MLV vaccination and blackleg. Two weeks later they get a respiratory booster, they are dewormed, and the heifers are calthood vaccinated against brucellosis (Bang's disease).

Weaning procedures

When the calves are first weaned, they are put in a 20-acre field near headquarters. Their dams may be in pastures on either side.

"The calves bawl for a day or two, but we've never had one go through the fence," Lemmon says. "We creep-feed, so when we move them in there we move the creep feeder in, too. They get the same feed they had before weaning in the same feeder."

Lemmon also buys around 500 Angus-sired, farm-fresh calves from nearby operations. Although he doesn't have as much control over their early health programs as he does his own calves, he makes up for it by stressing them as little as possible. As a result, only 3%-4% of them need treatment. And, in the last five years he's lost just two calves. The best he can tell, one ran into a tree and the other bloated.

Safeguarding

Animal Health



Start on Weaning



► **Right:** A sick calf is a rarity in Harvey Lemmon's program because of his emphasis on timely vaccinations.

The day he ships the calves from their home operations, he weighs them and puts them in a three-acre lot with the best grass hay he has and a self feeder filled with Cargill-Nutrena Cattle Transition feed, a medicated high-fiber, low-energy feed.

To avoid any more stress than possible, he waits five to 10 days later to vaccinate. At that time, he uses an MLV respiratory vaccination, seven-way blackleg, and a mycoplasma vaccine. He also deworms them.

"Most had a seven-way blackleg and respiratory vaccine at 3 to 4 months of age," he says. "Some had an MLV, but most had a killed product."

Two weeks after their first postweaning vaccinations, he repeats the MLV for respiratory diseases.

"Even though 45 days is the normal time to hold calves after weaning, we usually ship them after 30 days," he notes.

Lemmon partners with a feedlot on the cattle and says the treatment rate at the feedlot is well under 10%.

Vaccinate pregnant cows

While Lemmon's program is obviously working for him, Texas A&M University Extension veterinarian Floron Faries recommends tweaking the vaccination schedule a bit. If possible, he prefers to vaccinate cows in the last one to three months of pregnancy.

"Vaccinating the cows while they are pregnant protects the cows,"

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he says. “The immunity also passes to their colostrum and the calves get a high degree of immunity at calving.”

He says the cows are more than likely the source of infection for respiratory diseases like IBR, PI₃, BVD and BRSV, even though they aren’t sick. They have been exposed to the diseases but have developed immunity. When they calve, their immune systems are suppressed. The virus germs may break out of dormancy and multiply. Then the germs shed, and nursing calves pick them up.

Faries says calves may not be obviously sick with those diseases, but when they are stressed, like at weaning, watch out. That’s why he prefers to give calves their booster vaccinations one to two months after their first round and well before weaning.

“Weaning is the most stressful time in a calf’s life,” Faries emphasizes. “Stress lowers their immunity. You don’t need to vaccinate stressed calves.”

He also recommends the use of an MLV for respiratory diseases, both for the cows and calves. He says MLVs are labeled for pregnant

cows, and/or the calves nursing them, if the cows have had an MLV before they were pregnant, even as replacement heifers. However, on the calves, he doesn’t like to see an MLV used as a follow-up after two vaccinations of a killed product. “I have a theory that two killed vaccinations prevent the MLV from working,” he says.

He also says just one shot of killed vaccine is useless unless it is followed by another killed product or an MLV. “The first shot doesn’t immunize. It creates memory cells,” he stresses.

If a cow hasn’t had an MLV before, and a producer wants to use a live product on the calf, he says an intranasal IBR vaccine is an option. “The product is temperature-sensitive so it acts like a killed product,” he explains. “It is killed by the cow’s body temperature before it reaches her womb.”

Whatever form of vaccine a producer chooses, Faries says he hopes producers start their weaning health program early. “Preconditioning is not waiting until weaning,” he emphasizes.

