

## **A PROGRAM WITH PAYBACK**

### **How To Get More For Your Feeder Cattle**

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Programs for preconditioning of feeder cattle for placement in feedyards have been around for nearly 40 years. These programs vary and until recently have meant different things to different people. In the last few years, there has been a convergence of thought and some standardization of these programs. Consequently, proper preconditioning programs now are in wide use and are becoming a condition of sale in many cases. Preconditioning is a win/win situation. In other words, the proper program is a benefit to both buyer and seller. In the end, preconditioning can help supply our consumer with a better quality, safer eating experience. That is what we are all in business for.

Preconditioning began as strictly a health improvement program for feeder cattle that were going to be moved and probably change ownership. It has been well documented in recent years that this can enhance feedlot performance and finished animal carcass traits. In addition, healthy feeder cattle reduce feedlot costs of handling and a lot of hassle on the part of feedlot employees.

There is a part of the total preconditioning program that is often ignored. This really starts at birth. We know from the dairy industry that getting a minimum of two quarts of good colostrum into a newborn calf before it is six hours old is essential to young calf health. In addition to the necessary volume, the quality is important. It must contain the antibodies needed to start the calf right and prevent illness in the young animal which can weaken it and enhance disease outbreaks later in life. To accomplish this, one must have a sound herd health program which means updating the vaccination program in the cowherd annually. Cow condition score at calving should be over score 4.5 to insure proper volume. As we all know, calving area is also critical. This needs to be dry and clean enabling a calf to easily get up and suck soon after birth and to eliminate the presence of disease organisms which can be taken in by the new born.

The next step in total calf health comes in the pasture. The mother cow should be on a sound mineral supplementation program, especially including the trace mineral package that is needed in your particular area. We will address trace minerals again later, but copper, zinc, iron and selenium in the proper amounts and ratios are essential for immune response in the calf.

The question of creep feeding always arises. This is not always necessary but can be helpful. Getting calves used to eating dry feed generally helps adaptation to the bunk at weaning time. Getting some of the proper nutrition into the calf directly can also be helpful. Creep feeding is especially important when weaning older calves. When the cow milk volume is not

sufficient to meet the calf needs, they are forced to eating pasture which is often times late, poor grass. Calves weaned later in the fall and not on creep feed often are gaining at less than 1.5 pounds per day. Trials are showing that these poor gains have a potential negative affect on the marbling of the carcass at harvest time.

Low stress weaning is very important. Cattle handled under stress are weakened and more susceptible to disease. In addition, cattle handled under stress produce adrenalin which reduces the body's ability to react to the vaccine and develop antibodies. Rough handling can lead to injury as well as making cattle more wild for the rest of their life. Handling facilities that allow for easy flow and restraint are essential.

When it is necessary to treat animals, the best approach is to pull them quick and deep. By that I mean that you need to observe newly weaned calves 2 to 4 times per day and act immediately to check questionable ones. Early detection and treatment greatly enhances response and reduces time of disease infection. This dramatically reduces any long term affect on the animal. An old rule of thumb is to pull until you find a normal temperature. This means you have gotten all the sick ones. Calves will often have a fever before they show obvious symptoms. When choosing a general antibiotic for use for this treatment, you should confer with your veterinarian for recommendations and do not always use the cheapest one first.

Weaning ration nutrition is a big player in maintaining healthy calves. The first need is to have a palatable diet that calves will take to quickly. The diet should also be fairly dry. This means that each mouthful is meaningful as newly weaned calves do not spend a lot of time at the bunk. However, a ration can also be too dry. Fines and dust in a ration reduce intake. I like a mixed ration that is in the range of 72 -78% dry matter. Complete pelleted feeds work well too if the pellet is hard enough to prevent fines. The goal should be to get to 2.5% body weight intake as soon as possible. This intake should be of a nutritious makeup. The poorest nutritional product on your place is likely grass hay. Even though calves will take to it, they should be forced onto the properly formulated diet and grass hay access limited.

Some guidelines for the nutritional makeup of the weaning diet would be as follows:  
Energy – 50 mcal  
Protein – 15%  
Vitamins, minerals and trace minerals at 150% of NRC until intake is 2.5% body wt.  
Watch for high sulfate levels

The reason for the high concentrations in this diet is that intake is low for a number of days and it is advantageous to get the nutrient levels into the animal. In other words, concentrate your diet so that even limited intake insures nutrient intake. High sulfate intake either from feedstuffs or water is a problem as sulfates in excess tie up copper which is essential for a healthy immune system.

When calves are eating at 2.5% of body weight and they are appearing healthy, you can move to your growing diet. There is no set length of time for a weaning ration to be fed. The growing diet should be formulated to provide a minimum of 2.25 pounds of gain per day. Again this goes back to allowing for the animal to maximize marbling in the carcass at harvest. A

decent daily gain must be attained to insure optimum marbling deposition for the life of the animal. Look for a balance between green and flesh. Feedlots more and more are recognizing that a little flesh on a calf can mean that it is a healthy animal.

Another method to add real value to your calves is to find a way to group cattle into one or two pot load groups. These groups need to be of the same sex, frame and flesh condition. This allows a feedlot to utilize an all in, all out philosophy in its pens and feedlots will pay for this.

Let me now put some dollars to these so called added values. These are numbers that more and more feedlots are recognizing and will pay for. Any animal treated once costs about \$20. A calf treated 2 or more times can cost a feedlot \$75 to \$100 per head in treatment costs, loss of performance and lower quality grade. A dead animal costs around \$600. This adds up. When a feedlot has to treat 20% of a lot one time, the average cost of the whole lot goes up \$1 per cwt. When 20% are treated 2 or more times, that cost goes up \$4 per cwt. A 2% death loss amounts to \$2.50 per cwt. on the purchase price of the calves.

When a feedlot can buy 2 loads of uniform cattle and have 4 loads of uniform cattle to sell at one time, the dollars also add up. Sorting costs a feedlot \$5 to \$10 per head. When a pen needs to be sorted and half sold now and the other half three weeks later, the half empty pen cost is around \$600 for that 3 week period. The net of this is another \$2-\$3 per cwt. on the purchase price.

Another consideration for a feedlot is what we call “out” cattle. These are too fat, too heavy, too light or too thin. These problems are often due to a lack of uniformity within the pen or having extensively treated a number of cattle in the pen. When a pen is sold with 5% of these “out” cattle in, the discount to the price is equivalent to \$2 to \$3 per cwt. on the purchase price of the cattle.

Feedlots know these costs and are recognizing them. Studies are showing a \$5 to \$9 increase in purchase price for calves properly preconditioned. Uniform groups can easily bring \$5 per cwt. more. A recent study done in Iowa showed a \$2.50 per cwt. premium paid for calves that had a 2 shot, 45 day weaning program over a 1 shot, 30 day program.

Calf raisers also need to take into account that a sound weaning program adds weight. This can be as much as 75 pounds. While a heavier calf may be discounted slightly per cwt. the total take by the seller is usually a net of around \$20 per head. This figures the cost of the weaning feed and yardage and the slightly lower price per pound against the total dollars the animal brings at sale time.

We are in a new era of cattle prices today. Feeder prices have been at record levels. Feedlot buyers are much more aware of value. Performance and carcass characteristics are very important. With high priced feeders and cheap feed costs, feedlot performance is key to feedlot profitability. More and more buyers are willing to pay the price for calves “done right.”