

Basics of preconditioning to improve profit

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Many preconditioning programs involve vaccinations, weaning, castration and starting calves on a high energy diet. On some farms and ranches a few of these steps might not apply.

Preconditioning doesn't have a single definition to fit every cattle operation, says Brad White, DVM and interim director of the Beef Cattle Institute at Kansas State University (K-State).

Vaccinations - "If we properly prepare animals for the next phase of their life it will be much better for their health, their well-being and for production," White says.

When many people hear preconditioning, they think vaccination protocols and boosting the immunity of their calves. "Vaccinations are a tool we can use to help," White says. However, he cautions vaccines aren't going to fix all of your problems.

Producers should use vaccinations as part of a preconditioning program to reduce baseline morbidity.

Weaning - There are many different methods of weaning, depending on the environment and operation resources. Fence-line weaning across a barbwire fence and dry lot weaning on the ranch of origin are popular options.

Timing can change for weaning systems, too. Thirty to 45 days weaning are typical, but in some cases, calves can be abruptly weaned off the cow and hauled to a new operation.

A K-State study looked at the impact of time spent weaning prior to entering a feedlot on calves at about 4 months of age. Calves were split into unweaned, 15-, 30-, 45- and 60-day groups before they were shipped to a feedlot. White says the study showed if calves went directly to the feedlot without weaning it led to a greater occurrence of sickness and decreased average daily gains.

The other weaning periods all had improved performance and lower pull-rates than the non-weaned calves.

Castration - A valuable part of any preconditioning program is castrating bull calves.

Dan Thomson, DVM and professor at K-State, recommends castrating bull calves at an early age.

There is a belief that leaving the testicles intact longer will aid in weight gain because of the benefit of hormones.

Thomson points out testosterone will not have an impact until puberty, which won't happen until 8 to 10 months of age.

Several studies show castrating at birth has no impact on weight gain when compared to calves castrated at weaning.

Thomson says it is less stressful for young calves to go through castration. If calves are castrated when entering the feedlot there is a higher likelihood of death loss.

Bottom-line - To make a decision on which preconditioning system to use, there needs to be an incentive; typically the one generating the most profit wins out.

Even if a producer isn't seeing a price premium for raising preconditioned calves they should see heavier weights and more overall dollars.

White says to consider your cost of gain to determine when calves should be sold. Knowing the opportunity cost is vital in determining the value of a preconditioning program.