

Protect Your Marketing Opportunities

Dr. Rob Walsh

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Times are good in the cow calf sector. Prices this fall may actually support your cost of production and give you an opportunity to re-invest in your business. In return for you increased revenue the people buying your calves will require improved performance and health in the feedlot. This change in expectation was made abundantly clear at a producer meeting held this fall that brought cow calf producers together with backgrounds and feedlot operators. To paraphrase, one buyer was clear that if he thought your calves did not live up to their expectations he would not make the same mistake next year. With this in mind, how can you ensure your calves will be on the order buyers list this fall and next.

For calves coming off pasture this fall proper vaccination prior to sale gives you the first opportunity to build your reputation for providing calves that are profitable to purchase. Looking at research trials in fall purchased calves entering a feedlot vaccination with a 5 way modified live vaccine (BVD, IBR, BRSV, PI3) has consistently reduced the number of calves requiring treatment at entry. The addition of a shipping fever component to this vaccine has typically improved calf performance as well. There are several vaccines that include this combination that are very effective. Choosing which vaccine to use should start as a discussion with your Veterinarian and the sale requirements outlined by the vaccinated sale you are planning to market your calves through.

In order to claim that calves are properly vaccinated, you must handle the vaccine correctly from purchase to injection and that you gave the vaccine at the correct time. Temperature is the most important part of handling a vaccine. All vaccines should be kept cold but not frozen. As you head to the barn to process calves grab your cooler, ice packs and only mix what you can use in a couple of hours. Once a modified live vaccine is mixed you have roughly 2 hours to use the entire contents. Consider the size of the vaccine bottle that you purchase with the speed that you can process calves.

Second is the timing of vaccination in relation to your planned sale date. It is best to rely on the vaccine label for the answer to this question. In most situations the vaccine label will have a statement that suggests revaccination at least 2 weeks prior to period of stress for the greatest reduction in illness due to BRSV and bacterial pneumonia. For this reason selling calves as properly vaccinated should mean that they have been vaccinated and/or boosted 2-4 weeks before the date of sale.

Finally a blackleg vaccine should be given as well. If your calves have not been castrated or dehorned a tetanus component to the vaccine should be considered.

Castration and dehorning is your next opportunity to distinguish your calves. Marketing calves that are not castrated or dehorned will add risk for illness to the feedlot. These procedures are stressful for the calf and will result in decreased rate of gain for 1 to 3 weeks depending on how you process your calves. The Beef Code of Practice dictates that calves older than 9 months of age after Jan 2016 and older than 6 months of age after January 2018 require anesthesia and/or analgesia. There are lots of research trials that outline some of the choices to meet the requirements. There are very effective ways to reduce the stress response in castrated calves. The addition of pain-killers to castration and dehorning procedures at the feedlot adds expense to your calves.

Selecting the method of castration is based on age of the calf and operator preference. In calves less than 2 months of age there are bloodless options that will correctly castrate a calf with little to no impact on rate of gain or stress response of the calf. It is crucial that these methods be employed properly. Elastic bands will work but only if both testicles are below the band when it is applied. Always take the time to feel for both testis after the elastic is on. Selling a calf with a belly nut will not keep you on an order buyers list. Similarly pinching calves will work well when both cords are crushed separately and completely. It is crucial that if you are going to use these options that you give the calves time to heal. These are not good options for castration one month before a sale.

Similarly in older cattle there is a surgical tube bander that is very effective, however this technique requires at least 60 days between application and sale day. It is crucial to have these calves completely healed before sending them to the sales barn.

Surgical castration has the benefit of immediate removal of the testes, a relatively shorter healing time. Unfortunately it also has the greatest risk of complication. Again castration as early as possible in a calf's life will result in a healthy calf ready to perform at the time of sale.

In one of the producer meetings this fall it was abundantly clear that the guys buying cattle would much prefer to purchase cattle that were properly vaccinated, castrated and dehorned. At the other end of the desirability spectrum were cattle that were improperly castrated and dehorned. If you are not confident on technique or your ability to perform these procedures make a decision on how best to handle these animals.

So far we have discussed how to impact your calves now. The biggest opportunity to protect your calves and guarantee healthy calves in the feedlot is to limit the risk of producing a Persistently Infected BVD calf. This can only be accomplished by properly vaccinating your cow herd. BVD PI calves are the result of BVD infection before birth. We can't change a PI calf after it has been born. If you are not already vaccinating your cows it is time to start to think about how best to accomplish this.

Over the years there has been lots of discussion on how best to market your calves. Pre-conditioning, vaccination and castration and dehorning have always been part of these discussions. For the same period of time there has been discussion over the lack of premium on the calves that are properly prepared for sale. In 2014 this discussion is still going, we are not going to find an answer this year either. Your choice is how best to market your calves this year and continue to protect your reputation as the producer of choice for calves when they enter the sales ring. Plan to protect your reputation this year and next.