

# ON TARGET



by Justin Sexten, Ph.D.  
*Director, Supply Development*

August 2016

## *Reducing Risk*

As we begin to look toward fall marketing, thoughts turn to preparing calves for weaning. For some of you, that started at conception by having a well-vaccinated cow herd. You should have taken care to provide adequate nutrition in late gestation to improve colostrum quality, ready to prepare calves for weaning on the day they are born. That's by ensuring they got a good start, nursing immediately and receiving enough colostrum. Many build on this program by vaccinating calves and cows at branding or spring turnout. Some prefer to wait and gather calves two to four weeks prior to weaning for vaccinations while others plan to wean and work calves at the same time.

Regardless of your preference, preparing a calf for weaning and marketing is clearly a process and not an event, especially since all we have considered since day one are vaccinations. Creep feed can be used to increase weaning weight or to start a transition to independent life prior to weaning. Health-focused ranchers who prefer to evaluate performance without creep wait until weaning to begin supplemental feeding, consulting with nutrition and animal health advisers to develop the transition diet.

Management plans to reduce calf stress at weaning have at least two options: two-stage or fence-line weaning.

The first works well for those who want to vaccinate 10 to 14 days before weaning in that one gathering can be twice as productive. Calves are fitted with anti-nursing devices that begin to "separate" cows and calves while in the pasture together, so weaning is accomplished before the pairs are actually separated.

Fence-line weaning is a good practice to minimize stress and help teach calves how to find what they need in the weaning pasture using their desire to follow the cow to draw calves to feed and water, thus reducing the time needed to get them bunk-broke.

With all these opportunities to ensure and improve calf health, why all the press focused on preconditioning and weaning preparation? The National Animal Health Monitoring System reported in 2007 that 60% of beef operations do not vaccinate calves from birth to weaning; these operations represent 31% of the calves sold at weaning. Yes, that was nine years ago, but it's supported by results of a recent survey by Texas Tech and New Mexico State University. The 24 consulting feedlot nutritionists from across the U.S., representing about 15 million fed cattle annually, reported 28% of cattle entering feedyards today are considered high-risk for respiratory disease.

The last five years of Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity data show feedyard losses alone for calves that required one treatment while on feed incurred a cost of \$67 compared to healthy calves. That was due to reduced quality grade and gain, as well as greater treatment cost and death losses. For cattle treated twice, the discounts grow to \$300 per head. These discounts do not include the potential for loss at the ranch and stocker levels from scours, respiratory disease, parasites and pinkeye.

Nor do the cost figures account for losses to the entire pen from missed grid premiums for quality and yield grade, typically only paid after a harvest group surpasses the packing-plant average. High risk calves, while expensive themselves, are a serious drain on their group's ability to meet plant average, thus reducing premiums for all, and sapping the return on investment in genetics with premium potential.

Think about today's market dynamics. When the cattle inventory was at historic lows, any calf – high risk or not – was valuable due to limited supply. Now that the cow herd has grown, supply has increased and will continue to do so. Moreover, we are seeing a record high Choice-Select spread, even though the share of Choice and Prime cattle in the mix now exceeds 70% and represents record-high plant averages.

Many don't consider health challenges at the feedyard as having any influence on business at the ranch. But as calves head to market this fall, cattle feeders bid knowing there's a higher bar for quality grade premiums as well as a greater opportunity to be more selective in the larger pool of calves.

Consider lowering the risk of feeders discounting your calves: implement and document a weaning management plan designed to allow calves to transition to their new address with all their gain and grade potential intact.

END