

# ON TARGET



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## *Earlier is better*

Everybody knows bull calves sell at least \$5/cwt back of steers at weaning, and the discount grows for any still intact as yearlings. That's because virtually all of them are bound for the feedyard, where steers are the rule. The only question revolves around when the bulls become steers.

Castration at weaning means one more stress at a stressful time and mandates a backgrounding or pre-conditioning program to allow healing.

It coincides with the stress of weaning, vaccination and diet adaptation, so the calf is more susceptible to illness, both respiratory and digestive. Vaccines do not respond as well when there are respiratory issues, and we know these negatively influence end-product merit as well.

What is often not considered is the digestive upset that delayed castration can cause. Reduced feed intake can contribute to bloat or acidosis due to calves being off feed as they recover from castration. To realize full genetic potential, including beef quality, a calf should never have a bad day. After bull selection and adequately feeding the cow in gestation, castration at or near calving may be the third step in a foundation of quality.

Think about all the reasons to neuter males in the first few days, the least stressful time of life.

1. Lowest risk for bleeding or infection considering weather and pests.
2. Requires handling at birth which "allows" ensuring adequate colostrum intake and calf health.
3. Offers opportunity to begin individual animal management by tagging.
4. "Opportunity" to assess dam temperament and reduce future docility problems.
5. Any other time coincides with a vaccination or other stressor, compounding the challenge of effective vaccination.
6. Steer calves have greater marbling potential and fewer tenderness challenges than calves raised as bulls.

This is a foundation. Certified Humane® requires neutering in the first week or pain mitigation at a later processing date.

As consumers are increasingly interested in how cattle are raised, a delayed castration model is detached from their perception of "normal" male procedures around birth.

It's been said, "The longer the testes are attached to the animal the more the animal is attached to the testes." Increased mass and blood flow only serve to increase the risks associated with removal.

Risk of complications in surgical castration later in life is similar to the challenge of encountering undescended testis when banding a calf in the first few days of life.

Why let the one calf you cannot band due to under development drive the entire management program? There are other opportunities to tie up these loose ends.

Castration at birth allows greater marketing flexibility because weaning age can now be determined by forage availability, BCS of the dam and the market rather than needing to sort bulls from heifer mates.

As age at puberty has declined, an unintended early breeding season can be problematic for late castration models. As well, rapid market changes may not allow for adequate healing or recovery time before an opportunity passes for such models.

Of course, inadequate labor at calving can make banding at birth impractical. In such cases, castration at branding or pre-breeding makes the most sense, though it likely requires two people. It's still early in life when milk is the primary nutrient source so disrupted feed intake is less of a challenge. Maternal immunity is fading but calves are largely still protected while the first vaccine is administered.

You might worry about losing performance when neutering at birth, but data say the early initiative controls when the performance occurs rather than affecting the gain. Think you're still giving up 30 lb. of gain by neutering early? Value that gain at \$0.75/lb. or \$22.50 per bull. Then take a \$5/cwt discount on the same 625-lb. calf and lose \$31.25, not counting any other aspects of performance such as carcass merit or improved health. Then there's your reputation.

Buyers may discount all other management practices based on the inability to castrate calves and use technology. A set of all-natural bulls might as well announce, "Owner has no facilities and doesn't care – who'll start them, \$90 where?" **END**