

ON TARGET



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Early path to quality beef

You know the role health and nutrition play in feedlot performance, carcass quality grade and profitability. Yet many readers challenge the idea that these benefits can be realized at the ranch, unless they retain ownership beyond the farm or ranch gate.

The increasingly transparent market with buyers tracking results by source underscores that producing high-quality beef takes a systematic approach no one segment can afford to ignore. Ever. The time required to influence your herd's genetic potential is measured in years, so managing for quality is always important.

It takes four years, really: Select a superior sire, gestate for nine months and nurse the cow for another seven months. Develop heifers prior to breeding for seven months, breed those superior replacements, repeat the nine months of gestation and add another 16-18 months to convert that planned mating into beef.

I've just summarized four years of hard work selecting sires and replacements, providing care, nutrition and health like it was easy, but you know it requires tremendous coordination and attention to detail. Genetic improvement is not a task to be taken on by those who need instant gratification.

If your target is high-quality beef, whether through retained ownership or marketing the best possible product to the next owners in the supply chain, spring is the time to implement several key "best management practices" to sharpen your aim.

Those who will soon breed spring-calving females are laying the groundwork for their reality four years down the road. As quality grade continues to improve, make sire choices to position your herd well above today's quality grade average of 75% Choice and better. Consider aiming high enough to earn premiums for hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand and Prime targets that already make up one-third of the fed cattle supply while earning steady to higher premiums on each animal.

For those looking at the result of decisions made last spring, now is a great time to enhance those quality genetics. If males are not steered at birth, branding or when cows are processed for spring turnout, quality opportunities keep slipping away. Steers begin depositing marbling at earlier ages than bulls and are less likely to suffer a marbling setback due to stress or illness from castration near weaning.

While working cows at turnout, be sure to vaccinate calves as well because maternal antibodies make way for a vaccine response by the time calves reach two months of age. It's not uncommon to hear of vaccination for clostridia diseases such as blackleg in late spring, but the idea of protecting against pneumonia is less common. Respiratory vaccines at turnout prime the immune system to better respond at weaning, but perhaps more importantly, begin to offer protection before weaning. This is where best management practices for endpoint quality can pay off at the ranch.

Data from the dairy industry suggests heifers that contract respiratory disease early in life tend to be older at first calving and have decreased herd longevity. The more times a heifer calf encounters respiratory disease, the more those differences increase. Early vaccination is a support tool for genetic investment, ensuring heifers calve earlier and remain productive longer.

In later spring, just as cows hit peak lactation two months after calving, their calves' ability to grow begins to outstrip milk supply. I've noted before how the environment can restrict nutrition to the cow and keep a lid on calf growth, but when that limitation comes from internal parasites, you have management options. Treatment of internal and external parasites tend to benefit from delayed application, but you need to balance application timing with cattle handling opportunities and optimized pasture quality. Talk it over with your veterinarian.

Best practices for quality production are geared toward calves never having a bad day. Given the length of that process, each day for four years, there are many opportunities for all segments to capture value from these practices.

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