



Don't get stressed out

Talk about stress! Much of the country has endured a blistering, dry summer that forced early weaning and deeper cow culling. When you sell calves for much less than expected, and the buyer finds out he still paid too much to account for the sickness, nobody's happy.

Ease your stress by easing that of your calves. You may have felt trapped into selling early-weaned calves when it was a bad deal for all people and cattle involved. Even when it seems you are bombarded by bad luck, you can make some of it go away by a little bit of advance planning.

You generally know more than a few days ahead of weaning that it's coming. Scout your options with neighbors who may be in a similar predicament. Check with everybody from suppliers to buyers and feedlots about opportunities to retain ownership, at least until the calves can sell at something other than fire-sale prices.

If you're planning ahead for next year, look at opportunities to process calves when they are very young. Bulls can be neutered when the identification tags are applied. Dehorning paste applied to buds can eliminate the need for later stress. Ask your veterinarian about vaccinating for bovine respiratory disease using modified live virus (MLV) before the breeding season. Check the overall mineral status of your herd, because any deficiency can compromise calf health and product efficacy.

If your spring calves are still nursing their dams, offer them a little creep feed in the corral to get them used to independent living and to give the cows a break. After a couple of days, process the calves with any booster shots and vaccines your buyers or partners suggest. Decide then if some calves are poor candidates for weaning—you may be ahead to sell those as pairs. In a two or three weeks, wean the calves by removing the cows to an adjacent lot where they can still have contact. Calves may experience a little psychological discomfort, but usually not enough to affect them physically.

Once calves are weaned, don't let them out on too big a lot, at least not right away. That only encourages exhaustion from fence walking and puts them at risk of missing meals or even that clean, running water you set up just for them. Newly weaned calves in a range pasture are also hard to check on or get in for treatment if needed.

If calves are uneven in size and weight, separate smaller ones into a separate group, making sure all calves are in lots that have enough breeze. Don't isolate single animals, as it goes against the herd instinct and will add stress. Minimize dust by watering down the pens if Nature doesn't provide rain regularly.

The feed can start with mostly high-quality hay, but work with a consulting nutritionist as you step up to a feedlot-type grain ration. Some producers think of everything else, but guesswork on nutrition derails an otherwise well-planned program and opens the door to more stress.

Transportation that takes more than three hours will certainly cause stress, as documented by blood chemistry changes and elevated heart rates up to an hour after unloading. It's made worse if the shipping is linked to other processing and mixing with stressed weanlings from other herds. Excessive shrink, such as 6% to 7% in weight, may be associated with stress and the resulting "shipping fever," when calves break with bovine respiratory disease.

Wait a few hours after unloading, perhaps until the following morning, before processing newly arrived calves. Try to work with the ranch of origin to complement rather than duplicate treatments.

New arrivals suffer stress if they are too recently weaned, mixed with many strange pen-mates, exposed to new diseases against which they have no protection, and expected to eat something they have never had before—just as a strong weather front moves through.

You can't do much about the weather, other than reschedule shipping if a storm is eminent. Everything else can be minimized by management that will make both you and your calves feel better.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll consider the next generations of cattle and producers. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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