



Recognize your calves?

By Steve Suther

Most of the calves now nursing cows will be weaned in the next few weeks. Some will shrug it off with little stress and therefore little negative effect on later performance. Others will enter a downward spiral of health from which they may not recover.

Which calves are yours?

Some calves—both crossbred and purebred—were the product of planned genetics and a managed calving season. They are uniform and predictable.

Others are simply cattle of unknown genetics, and the best they can hope for is to be somebody's "opportunity calves."

Which calves are yours?

In this time of elevated costs and risk, an estimated \$1 billion may be lost as calves transition from their farm or ranch of origin to feedlots.

Some calves have received two rounds of vaccinations in carefully considered health management programs by the time they are weaned. Their immune systems are up to most challenges, and they are fully eligible for "natural" beef premiums. Their documented identification system sets them up for export and other program premiums.

Other calves are starting to feel sick about the lack of thought to their health or any kind of premiums beyond the trailer gate.

Which calves are yours?

Some calves were introduced to creep feed a few weeks ago, or at least shared in some grain meals alongside the cows at the pasture fence last week. They sampled hay and grain in a bunk, and tank water, maybe even water from an automatic fixture.

Others know only milk and pond water on weaning day.

Which calves are yours?

Some calves were introduced to the weaning corral casually. With their mommas, they were led there for pre-weaning shots not long ago. In a few herds, they were fitted with self-weaning nose

rings last week. In more than a few herds, they have been grazing along a fence that will soon separate them from their mommas.

Other calves are what we might call “naïve.” The awful truth of separation will hit them hard.

Which ones are yours?

On weaning day, some calves will have less concern about which gate they entered as they return to graze next to, but apart from what was once their bigger half. Some will be gently loaded for a short ride to preconditioning pens, where they will find familiar creep feeders, hay, water and grain, which they will soon fully appreciate.

Other calves will panic after being driven into a “trap” and tricked or prodded into a trailer ride to town. Their only hope is purchase by a more professional cattleman.

You may say this litany is unfair to large producers. It’s easier for the guy with 50 or 60 cows to implement these strategies. On extensive open ranges, that’s certainly true. In every size category, there are boons and boondoggles. Large operations can look for ways to make the most out of branding roundup opportunities, with booster shots at weaning or at least coordination of plans with a preconditioner or feedlot.

You may say this litany is unfair to small producers, but it does not take a large investment in facilities to prepare for weaning. If you keep any cattle, you must have secure facilities for occasional penning, and your veterinarian can help from there.

Alternatively, those with small herds can build a sense of community by working together on administering vaccinations with shared ownership of some portable equipment. That can lead to one neighbor deciding to act as preconditioner for all.

At the auction markets, the risk is higher than ever before on light, unweaned, unknown calves. They’re selling at significant discounts to the kind with health and breed program tags and the extra pounds that say they are graduates of a preconditioning program. Some weighing 700 pounds are selling for more per pound than others weighing 450 pounds.

Which calves are yours?

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at how we can learn from example.

Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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