



Give calves a clue

By Miranda Reiman

Imagine you're suddenly snatched up from your daily routine and dropped off on a New York City street. You're alone, with no cell phone, no wallet and no map.

That's not the way you'd like to see the Big Apple and, unless you thrive on spontaneity and challenges, it would make for a lot of stress. Hundreds, if not thousands of miles away from home with no family contact or money, food and survival would become a real concern.

Calves have to deal with similar concerns at weaning. They lose contact with their mothers and have to quickly adapt to new sources of feed and water while fighting a general confusion about the new world around them.

A little advance planning on your part can go a long way toward the dawn of a weaning day that is less stressful, and thus more successful. The preparation needs to start well ahead of separation day.

It starts by getting calves in shape for the big event – you could say it goes all the way back to before they're born, but let's assume you kept them healthy. Experts agree that you should give at least one round of vaccinations, both for clostridial and respiratory disease, while calves are still on the cow. That mother should be in good condition with adequate nutrition, including vitamins and minerals to strengthen the calf's immune system.

Groundwork isn't limited to the animals. During that same pre-weaning period, think about your facilities and figure out what needs to be done to get them ready. Could you improve some fences or redesign anything to make it run more smoothly? You should also know who is going to do what at and after weaning.

Sorting calves off, trucking, feeding, maintenance, follow-up vaccinations and record keeping—they all take time and a person dedicated to doing them. If you're a one-man show, that issue is pretty much settled, but you're still probably going to need some extra hands at one or two points in the process. The sooner you schedule that the better. If you wait too long, any capable hands will be booked, and rookies increase the odds for errors.

Just like a NYC-bound traveler would be well advised to bring a wallet and directions, calves appreciate knowing what's next. A few weeks before weaning, you might introduce them to some dry feed and watering systems they'll be using shortly. Exposure to people and trucks isn't a bad idea, either. The more stressors they encounter while they're still in the pasture, within earshot of mama, the better.

Then, after all this work, da-dadda-da: Weaning day arrives! All systems, setups, herds and geographic locations are different; there are thousands and thousands of "ideal" scenarios. The key is to keep the calves as calm as possible and get them eating and gaining right away. Your feed source will depend on local resources, but be sure to monitor intakes so you will know when something goes awry.

It's also important to keep cattle on a steady or increasing plane of nutrition after they're weaned. That helps keep them healthy. Plus, you don't want them to go backwards or the next person down the line isn't going to be happy with their results. They want cattle that know how to eat and have been taken care of between weaning and marketing. Don't compromise their ultimate beef quality by kicking them out on sub-par pastures or otherwise trying to starve a profit out of them.

If you're selling shortly after weaning, it still makes good sense to get the most gain and most pounds to sell.

At the end of the season, your main goal is healthy, profitable critters. Some extra work on both sides of weaning should help you meet that goal.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will look at keepers and cullers. Meanwhile, if you have questions for us, call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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