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NEWS

June 28, 2010

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Photo links:

Bryan McMurry: <http://www.cabpartners.com/news/photos/Bryan4.jpg>

Jeff Heldt: <http://www.cabpartners.com/news/photos/Jeff3.jpg>

Food for thought

Nutritional considerations for early weaned calves

Meeting the nutritional needs of a young calf might sound familiar to parents of young children: feed well, feed often and prepare for pickiness.

Weaning at 90 to 120 days of age has proved to be an effective tool to maximize feed efficiency and stimulate marbling development, but that comes with added nutritional responsibility.

Cargill Animal Nutrition beef specialist Bryan McMurry lays it out: “Early weaned calves have marginally functional rumens compared to a calf weaned at 200 days, which means less-than-optimal digestion of feedstuffs for the early weaned calf,” he says. “As a result, feeds used in their diets must be high quality and highly digestible.”

Early weaned calves have smaller rumens, less intake capacity and fewer microbes to digest feed than older weanlings.

“They can’t eat very much, so every little bit has to be pretty darn nutrient-dense to take advantage of their high feed efficiency,” says ruminant nutritionist Jeff Heldt, with Land O’Lakes Purina Feed.

Ideally, nutritional considerations start before weaning.

“Getting them on a decent creep feed 30 days before will make the process a lot easier,” McMurry says.

Brush, Colo., rancher Justin Curtis transitioned from creep feeding to feeding a 90-day-old weaned calf. He focused on using readily available feeds and facilities.

Three weeks before weaning, he set up electric fence in the irrigated pasture his pairs were grazing. With a wire just tall enough for calves to walk under but hot enough to keep cows out, he offered a 50/50 combination of ground hay and corn in tire feeders.

“When it came time to wean, we didn’t have any trouble getting them to the bunk,” Curtis says. “Once they know what feed is, those young calves fill up just like an older one would.”

The only difference he saw was selectivity. “If you’re mixing your own feed, you can’t just blend some straw into their grain – they’ll pick the low-quality feed parts right out if they don’t like it. You just have to use high-quality roughage in their ration.”

Home-grown feedstuffs can work for early weaned calves, but it’s critical to make sure the diet is balanced for a young, early weaned calf. McMurry advises using pelleted feed to eliminate ingredient sorting. Pellets work well for creep as well as transition diets, although the nutritional composition should be different.

“As soon as you pull the milk away and create the stress that comes with weaning, you completely change the requirements of that calf,” McMurry says. “The transition diet needs to be even more palatable and fortified.”

McMurry says the ideal transition diet for young, dry-lot weaned calves should have a minimum crude protein level of 14%, make that 16% for those weighing less than 300 pounds (lb.). It should provide moderate energy levels of 50 to 52 Mcal net energy for gain (NEg) for the first two weeks, trace mineral levels 25% to 30% above a normal starter diet, and plenty of high-quality grass hay.

“They’ll readily eat all the high-quality grass hay you can feed them,” he says. “That will expand their rumens and get their digestive systems adapted to a dry diet quickly.” After the first two weeks the energy level in the diet can be increased gradually.

Pique interest by filling bunks with enough hay to last all day, and then pour the feed on top, McMurry suggests. “During weaning, calves will nearly always eat hay before anything else – it’s essential in getting them to settle down and eat during the early days in the weaning process.”

Similarly, cattlemen weaning in the pasture must focus on available forage quality and quantity. Heldt says matching that with appropriate supplement is essential to optimal gain.

“If you are going to keep those cattle on pasture and still want to develop them to normal finishing, you will need a corn-based energy supplement to get a 3-lb.daily gain,” he says. “If you want to be more conservative with a 2- or 2.5-lb. gain, you can get by with a protein-based supplement on grass.”

Either way, he warns coccidiosis can be a concern. “From a feed-additive standpoint, an ionophore would be pretty critical to keep that in check.”

Self-feeders are a viable option.

“You want to make sure every animal has an opportunity to eat whenever it wants, and bunk space and competition with those young calves can be a problem,” Heldt says. “You sure don’t want a 100-day-old calf getting hogged out of feed, because it will show up a lot worse on him than it would on a calf twice as big. The value in a self-feeding program is that it’s available 24/7, which is ideal from the standpoint of labor and feed management.”

Getting calves started on the right nutritional track early can falter if it isn’t followed through to finish.

“The last thing we want to happen is to set this calf up at the level of feed efficiency and performance we have achieved at the ranch, then send him to the feedlot where he gets the typical starter ration instead of the hotter, denser diet he’s used to,” Heldt says.

“There needs to be some communication that these cattle know how to eat and that they are on an above-average level of performance,” he says. “Then the feedlot can decide how to best manage them based on that information.”

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