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NEWS

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Patience payoff

Getting the most out of calves in the feedyard takes a little patience during preconditioning.

Research from New Mexico State University says weaning calves for at least 41 days before placing them on feed can increase their net return.

“The bottom line is, if we can separate the stressors of weaning and commingling calves and putting them in the feedyard, we can better prepare calves to perform in the feedyard,” says Clay Mathis, New Mexico Extension beef specialist.

The study compared records of more than 800 steers entered in the New Mexico Ranch to Rail program over a four-year period. The records of individual steers were sorted based on how long they were preconditioned prior to entering the program: up to 20 days, 21 to 40 days, 40 to 60 days and 61 or more days.

“Beef cattle that were weaned for 41 to 60 days prior to entering the feedyard gained faster, were on feed for fewer days and had the highest numerical carcass value,” Mathis says. “The implications of this study are many.”

The lowest performing group (0 to 21 days) had an average daily gain of 2.9 pounds per day (lb./day). The 41 to 60 days group increased to 3.3 lb./day and also returned \$43.89/head more than the bottom set.

“When financial risk associated with time is considered, the optimum preconditioning period is from 41 to 60 days,” he says, noting that group had the highest carcass value at \$114.91 per hundredweight (\$/cwt.). Those weaned longer than 61 days came in just 28 cents behind that, but the calves preconditioned the shortest time dropped to \$111.77/cwt. in carcass value.

“There’s still a large portion of the calves in the United States that are weaned and immediately shipped,” Mathis says. This data supports the recommendations given in the Texas Value Added Calf-45 (VAC-45) program.

“It’s good to pick that 45-day range, but there’s more to it than that,” says Mathis. The research did not account for how calves were managed prior to the feedyard, and that can make a big difference, he says.

“There’s an opportunity for the industry to learn more about the best ways to manage those calves during that period of time to best prepare them to stay healthy and perform in the yard,” Mathis says.

The overall message, he says, is that having the patience to separate weaning and shipping stress by 45 days or more can give calves the boost they need during finishing.

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