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NEWS

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Photo: http://www.cabpartners.com/news/photos/Mitch_Blanding.jpg
http://cabpartners.com/news/photos/collinge_mike.jpg

Stocker Series, Part 2 of 3 this week

Pre-grass stocker health management pays

Cattle health matters at every segment, but it could be the single biggest profit determinant for the stocker phase.

Mitch Blanding, senior veterinarian with Pfizer Animal Health, and rancher Mike Collinge shared tips for managing health at last month's "Backgrounding for Quality" field day on the ranch near Hamilton, Kan.

The first weeks of ownership are some of the most critical, so Collinge keeps that top of mind when he procures 450- to 500-pound (lb.) calves to graze on his native grass Flint Hills range.

Within 24 hours of arrival, the calves move through processing facilities for a first round of vaccines and initial temperature readings. "I've yet to find anything as effective as temperature to really measure a calf's health," Collinge said.

In the following week, calves run through the processing facilities again, temperatures are checked and antibiotics administered as needed. The process is repeated four to five days later.

"We like to play offense, not defense on animal health. You can never catch up if you're playing defense," Collinge explained. "Monitoring and recording temperatures indicate health issues long before they start showing physical signs."

Blanding said there are three ways to intervene with respiratory disease: prevention, control (mass treatment) and therapy (individual treatment). Prevention offers the highest return on investment, but that doesn't mean just making sure they get their shots.

"What are our realistic expectations of vaccinations?" Blanding asked. "There are some groups with less than 40% of the animals capable of responding to vaccines. There are even some groups that we'd be lucky to get 30% responding. What causes that? Stress."

Administering a vaccine doesn't mean the cattle won't get sick.

“The only thing we’ve guaranteed is that the animal is exposed to it,” he said. “The next step is that they have to respond. Then we have to get protection, immunity. That still leaves a lot of room for error.”

The take-home point is that prevention also includes reducing stress, Blanding said.

At the Collinge Ranch, daily handling and movement helps. Load lots are kept in separate grass traps and brought in one at a time once a day. That first two or three weeks is a critical time to get the calves proper nutrition that gets them ready to be on their own for grazing.

“Copper, zinc and selenium are incredibly important parts of a starter ration when it comes to the health of these calves,” the rancher said.

After feeding, a group is kicked back out to pasture and the next group is brought in. The feeding crew monitors calves as they come into the feed pen. If they spot a calf that looks sick at the end of the group, they’ll separate the tail end and bring five to 10 calves in to have their temperatures checked and monitored. Not only is this less stressful on the calves, Collinge explained, but it’s also a good indication of the health of the rest of the herd.

Calves that are slow to the feedbunk and hanging around others already showing physical signs of illness are the most likely candidates. “You might find one or two in that group that are running a temperature besides the one that looked sick,” he noted. “You can get ahead of that illness and treat them before it becomes a problem.”

Another “must” to prepare cattle for the feedlot is deworming. In fact, an Iowa State University study says it’s worth about \$24 per head.

“The immune system is a finite thing,” Blanding says. “If the immune system is being occupied by parasites, it’s less capable of dealing with the organisms that cause respiratory disease.”

Of course, all of Collinge’s procedures are geared toward reducing labor, stress and costs for the ranch, but there’s a greater reason: “We hope that these things are having an impact on carcass quality and performance. The goal is to create cattle that will do better down the line,” he said.

Research confirms that’s the right approach. Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist with the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand, shared Iowa data that shows calves that had to be treated twice have a lower average daily gain (2.93 lb. vs. 3.22 lb.) and poorer feed conversions.

“Those healthy cattle lay on intramuscular fat more easily, too, thanks to that added gain,” Fike says. That shows up in higher marbling scores and increased CAB acceptance for the calves that were never treated, 18.7% compared to 11.1% for their twice-treated counterparts.

“We know these stress-free, healthy cattle can really bring home the carcass quality,” Fike said.

For more information on the meeting, search “Backgrounding for Quality” on the Black Ink Blog, www.blackinkwithcab.com.

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