

Death in the Feedlot ñ A Harsh Pocketbook Reality

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The cattle business is good. To the typical producer, who is quite comfortable with just knowing the industry is doing well, the feeling is great. But there are some important questions. How well is the individual producer's business doing and is the money flowing in the right direction? In times like this, with decent prices and reasonable costs, it is easy to put the brain in neutral and let things slide a bit. But lost revenue doesn't always mean a loss; it may simply be reduced profit.

A particular set of cattle at the Dickinson Research Extension Center had on feed can be used to illustrate the principle. Lot 3300 recently closed out, but was really not the kind of lot one likes to report. However, one of our general principles is that it is better for us to learn than for individual producers.

To set the stage, lot 3300 was a set of early weaned steer calves, properly vaccinated, preconditioned and sent to the feedlot on Oct. 7, 2003. Total head received was 40. There was nothing remarkable about these calves. They were good old northern-type calves, well bred, and quite indistinguishable from most calves leaving North Dakota. Upon arrival, the calves weighed in at an average of 548 pounds, with an agreed upon pay weight of 562 pounds. The calves were valued at \$106.50 per hundredweight for a total value of \$598.14. Health was evaluated as good.

As the cattle remained on feed, all the calves but six became ill and required treatment. The average treatment cost was \$23.58 for the 40 calves. For feeding cattle in general, 1 to 2 percent would be a more accepted level, not 84 percent as in this lot. That being said, the cattle performed well. The yard's professional and focused treatment regime brought the cattle through the crisis. Given the exceptional marketing environment, the lot still brought a net return of \$78.18 per head. That sounds good, but following the health crisis, two of the steers succumbed to digestive disorders, generally called bloat. The total impact on lot 3300 was devastating.

Feedlot costs plus the receiving value of the two calves

triggered a total negative of \$1,750. These dollars need to be made up and paid for by the remaining 38 steers. Dividing the \$1,750 by 38, means the net return for each of the marketed steers was reduced by \$46.05. The average net return per live steer dropped to \$32.13. All and all, not a favorable feeding experience, but there are some general reminders that lot 3300 calls to our attention.

Always remember to prepare calves for shipping and properly vaccinate all calves prior to shipping. Regrettably, as pointed out, health outbreaks can still occur. Mother Nature has a twist to everything. For this lot, the twist was huge. The other point: health-related problems do not stop at the sick pen. Potential marketing profits may be robbed, as was the case with this lot. Only 26.4 percent of the calves graded choice and 5.3 percent were no rolls. Health may or may not have caused the lower quality grades. Cattle with health-related setbacks can potentially lose what premiums the lot may have had going for them prior to arrival.

Lot 3300 will be added to the long list of feeding experiences the DREC has encountered over several years. Had this lot been on feed during lower carcass values, the loss would have been cash out of the bank. But for today, it's just less cash to put in the bank and a footnote to never take calf vaccinations lightly. Are early weaned calves more at risk? These calves are just part of a study to help answer that question and others, so stay tuned. While you are waiting, make arrangements to get your calves vaccinated. There are no guarantees, but it's all we have.

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0206.

The Impact of Feedlot Death Loss

Dickinson Research Extension Center Lot 3300

Delivery Date	October 7, 2003
Number	40 steers
Days on feed	189
Death loss	2 steers
Net return on 38 live steer basis	\$ 78.18
Net return with deads included	\$ 32.13