

## Stress-free Calves – No Hot Shots, Whips or Sticks

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As noted several weeks ago, herd health was the third priority in an industry-wide survey to identify management priorities in the cow-calf business. These priorities change depending on the time of year.

As weaning approaches (or is under way for some), herd health moves front and center for cow-calf producers. Not a fall day goes by when producers are either physically or mentally sorting and working calves.

The key to successful fall management is the ability to slowly move a calf from dependence on its mother to being a socially well-accepted calf among its peers. That seems like a very methodical process, but anyone who has tried to settle down a set of bawling calves knows otherwise.

The goal in weaning is to have a set of calves simply walk away from the cow herd, start eating on its own and never look back. Those calves don't end up in a sick pen, so it is not only their vaccination protocols they have received that assures their health.

Although much of the focus on calf preparation for weaning is focused on vaccination protocols, stress is the big culprit. The absolute need to eliminate stress is critical.

The key to eliminating stress begins with the selection of replacement heifers. That's done by allowing only civil, well-behaved heifers into the cow herd. Then cows are bred only to bulls that have a similar, acceptable attitude, which means no rodeo bulls allowed.

As the cows are calved, they are allowed to see and interact with people, so the calf at the cow's side understands that humans do not turn on the "fight or flight" syndrome. Humans coexist with the cow herd so the calf does not have to fear and take up flight whenever the producer walks in the pen.

As the calving season gives way to summer grazing, are the cattle monitored and allowed to work with humans, horses or other equipment producers haul around? Is the herd allowed to be relaxed as calves and cows are checked? Is there an occasional treat that brings the cows up to the feeder and has them looking forward to a visit from the producer?

When necessary, is a trip that brings the calf through a set of chutes a reasonable experience? Have the hot shots, whips and sticks long ago been cast over the cliff and allowed to rust and rot in the refuse pile? Are the previous and upcoming fall work sessions planned to allow appropriate time for all the work to be done?

Are breaks and lunch scheduled so co-workers maintain healthy attitudes about the day's work load? Has management accounted for the thoughts and suggestions from those helping for the day? Is the day a serious cattle day or a fun day for outside riders at the expense of the cattle?

Producer attitude and preparation can control stress. Not controlling stress starts the many bad responses a calf experiences as it leaves its mother's side. Calves that are being fed for the first time should see only the feed and not fear the feeder or person doing the feeding.

I know there are those who mumble and can't give up their old ways. In many cases, those old ways are good.

Ask yourself if you are fighting these calves and creating fear and stress. If the answer is yes, throw away those old ways. There are better ways to acclimate calves to interacting with people. Fear never should be put in a calf.

There are many calves raised free from all interaction with people. To reduce stress, let's make sure the first interaction is reasonable and something we all would like to experience and write home to mom about. Excitement in life is all right, but why not take the extra money you make on a good set of stress-free calves and buy a ticket for a great canoeing trip down a set of rough rapids. The calves will be better off.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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**The Flight or  
Fight Syndrome**

