

you are here: [home](#) → [columns](#) → [beef talk](#) → [beef talk: precondition calves regardless of weaning time](#)

navigation

Links

- [News Home](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Archives](#)

Feeds

- All News [RSS](#)
- BeefTalk [RSS](#)
- Dairy Focus [RSS](#)
- Prairie Fare [RSS](#)
- Economics [RSS](#)
- Renewable Accounts [RSS](#)
- Small-business Savvy [RSS](#)

Twitter

- On Twitter follow [NDSU Ag News](#)

BeefTalk: Precondition Calves Regardless of Weaning Time

The well-prepared, preconditioned calf rewards the producer, the buyer and, most importantly, the calf.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Now is the time to start preparing calves for marketing with a sound preconditioning program developed in concert with your veterinarian.

Drier weather may mean selling this year's calves earlier, so preconditioning your calves sooner rather than later makes good sense. Do not wait and, out of frustration, call the trucker and just send the calves to town.

Preconditioning calves prior to and at weaning is not a new concept. The North Dakota Beef Cattle

Images



Calves That Excel Should Be Marketed Correctly, Whether Weaned Early or Late

columns

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Precondition Calves Regardless of Weaning Time](#)

(2017-07-27) The well-prepared, preconditioned calf rewards the producer, the buyer and, most importantly, the calf.

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You can make a lot of different menu items with zucchini. [FULL STORY](#)

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Improvement Association's "Green Tag" program from the late 1980s explained the need in a printed brochure.

"Preconditioning includes a complete health management program which prepares the calves to better withstand the stress and adjustment they need to undergo when they leave the home farm or ranch in route to the feedlot," according to the brochure. "Calves are castrated in most cases, dehorned, vaccinated against common shipping and feedlot diseases, treated for grubs and lice and have the opportunity to accustom themselves to water troughs and feed bunks. Additional practices are encouraged which include implants that stimulate the natural growth processes, complete herd health programs within the cow herd and strong relationships with professional veterinarians and animal scientists."

During the last 30 years, none of these principles has changed (although I must admit the word "grub" does not come up very often in conversation anymore) because the common sense benefits are real despite a list of excuses: lack of facilities, lack of labor and unwillingness to take on the risk.

In mid-July, the Dickinson Research Extension Center weaned a set of 45 calves, and today the calves are doing fine. The calves, while not happy, were in familiar surroundings with feed and water. During this critical acclimation phase, they slowly

got on with life and were introduced to commercial feed to encourage good feed intake.

Walking past them just the other day, they were quick to run, but with a look back, they slowly came to the feeders. This period is critical because every hour that passes when calves do not eat and drink increases the probability that they will descend into a sick pen. Whether vaccinated or not, the necessities of life must be met.

Calves will be stressed as they are moved through the marketing chain, so they need to know to stop and grab a drink of water and bite of hay to stay healthy. Scared, high-headed calves, unable to slow down long enough to smell the feed and water, soon will become depressed, low-headed calves on their way out.

The thought among some producers is if one moves the calves fast enough, the end destination will adapt the calves, as well as pay the bill for any loss. That may work for some, but the well-prepared, preconditioned calf rewards the producer, the buyer and, most importantly, the calf.

The principles in that old brochure are still the same today. Protecting calves is paramount. This protection focuses on preparing calves for a smooth transition to their new home, along with a good calf vaccination program to help the calf remain healthy once exposed to newly

encountered pathogens.

Start with a preweaning vaccination protocol and revaccination at weaning. Proper management enables cattle to withstand the daily issues of maintaining health and vigor, but a properly prepared and challenged immune system through appropriate vaccinations is critical to total herd resistance to local pathogens.

The basic concept of immunity is relatively simple. The body reacts to foreign objects by developing defensive antibodies. The key to good health is to have the proper “antibody” response present within the living system to combat invading viruses, bacteria or other foreign substances.

Each antibody (or immunoglobulin, if you like big words) is very specific, only consuming or catching one type of invading substance. This process is called vaccination and is the reason calves need to be vaccinated. All the vaccine does is prime the system so some day, in the event of a real invasion, antibodies are ready to be called into action. This priming vaccination generally is followed by a second booster vaccination to fine-tune the system into making very specific antibodies for each incoming foreign substance.

With improved vaccinations available and more vaccination programs readily attainable, following the labels and protocols developed by the respective vaccine manufacturers is very important

for producers. The end result is calves that can withstand the rigors of life without mom and adapt readily in whatever system the calf is placed.

No perfect preconditioning program, no perfect time to vaccinate, no perfect time to market exists, but as a producer, with the help of good professional health and management advice, the odds can be stacked in a favorable outcome for the calf.

May you find all your ear tags.


For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



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