

It’s almost weaning time. Now what?

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Fall means weaning time for many producers. While temperatures may not feel like fall for a few more months, it is time to think about your management strategy or preconditioning program this fall. The weaning period is a critical time and without proper planning can set that calf behind for the rest of its lifetime. A good weaning or receiving program should include a health plan, nutrition plan, and a plan to adjust calves to new surroundings. However, there is not one size fits all approach to a good preconditioning program

Several universities have examined price premiums and discounts for feeder cattle in many different scenarios, from local auction markets to large video auctions. It has consistently been shown that buyers are willing to pay premiums for cattle that have been through a good preconditioning program. Cattle that have been preconditioned are typically expected to be healthier and more prepared to thrive in their next phase of life. This means that for the buyer there is often less risk associated with these cattle, and they are willing to pay a premium for this increase in value.

A good weaning or receiving program should have several objectives. The ultimate goal of any program is to reduce the inherent stress from weaning or shipping, and prepare cattle to succeed in the future. Along with this, another objective should be to develop immunity and fight off new disease challenges. The third objective of a receiving or weaning program involves the behavior of cattle. During this time, calves are asked to immediately adapt to new surrounding and perhaps even new penmates. They must learn to eat and drink from feed bunks and water troughs, and adjust to a new social hierarchy. Based on these objectives, the primary goals of this program should be to keep cattle healthy and have them start eating quickly.

The health component of the weaning or receiving program is often the first part of the program that most producers consider. Specifics of a health program should be tailored to both an operation and cattle’s needs. It is important to work closely with a veterinarian familiar with the operation, and type of cattle. Following Beef Quality Assurance guidelines should also be an integral part of a health program. Since weaning can be such a stressful time in a calf’s life, it is generally recommended initial vaccinations should be given prior to weaning to allow calves time to develop immunity before being introduced to the stress of weaning. Boosters can then be given at weaning. It is important to pay attention to label directions as some vaccines may differ, and even a vaccine used for years may have a dosage or instructions change. Although the components of each health plan will differ in regards to specifics, several management practices are generally recommended. Cattle should be dewormed (specific products may defer depending on the advice of your veterinarian), vaccinated for Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Parainfluenza-3 (PI-3), Bovine Respiratory Syncytial Virus (BRSV), and Blackleg (7-way Clostridial), tested for persistently infected BVD, and implanted with growth-promoting compounds if desired. Additional treatments and vaccinations may be needed based on veterinary advice.

The nutritional component is the next critical piece of a weaning or receiving program to consider. Nutrition can come in the form of pasture or hay and supplement. Regardless of its form or delivery method, stimulating intake quickly, and getting nutrition into calves early is

vital. Without sufficient intake, calves will not only lose weight, but they may be more susceptible to disease. It is important to remember that feed intake will likely be low in the initial part of the period, and adjust supplements accordingly. This is the reason that many commercially available starter feeds contain a higher percent protein and more energy. It is important to provide a feed source that is highly palatable (calves should want to eat it), nutrient dense (calves will only eat small amounts), and contains the right blend of nutrients to meet the requirements based on size and expected feed intake.

Choices for nutrition for your program are too numerous to mention here, and several can be tailored to fit your needs. One option may involve a fence-line weaning system with high quality pasture and supplement. Another option involves a dry or small grassy lot with a nutrient dense supplement and access to hay. Regardless of the chosen system, it is important that the diet is made of high quality ingredients that are readily digestible (this is not the time to feed your worst quality hay). Remember that all feed ingredients are not created equal. Be sure to also consider how the feed or supplement will be delivered. Time and labor are important considerations. For a producer with a full time job away from the ranch, a self-fed option may be the best choice, as feed is available to cattle 24 hours a day regardless of your availability. However, it is still important to monitor that cattle closely to be sure that they are healthy and consuming feed. Often the first sign a calf is getting sick may be it going “off feed”. For some producers with access to more storage and feeding equipment, hand feeding to provide a constant source of fresh feed may be a good option.

The chosen diet should also be supplemented with a good mineral program. Minerals and vitamins are essential at this time of high stress. Several vitamins and minerals have been shown to have a big impact on immune function. Selenium and vitamin E both have properties as antioxidants. The trace mineral zinc is important to the function of the immune response which is particularly important during this time. Copper is also a mineral important to immune function which is an essential part of several enzymes of the immune system. There are several options for mineral supplements that are specifically designed for weaning or receiving cattle as they are very palatable, and more biologically available (i.e. organic or chelated forms).

The last consideration of a good preconditioning program is: how will you reap the benefits of it when it comes time to market your cattle? If you take the time, effort, and expense to put cattle through a good preconditioning program, the major benefit is receiving premiums for those cattle. It's important to remember that if the buyer doesn't know those cattle have been preconditioned and some specifics of that program then it's unlikely you'll receive those premiums. Regardless of the avenue you choose to market those cattle, it is important to be clear and share the details of the program.

Planning in advance and considering each part of the weaning or receiving program is vital to its success. A sound program is one that is tailored to the producer's needs, and one that achieves the desired results. Reaping the benefits of a well-designed program is within reach for any producer and requires only a small amount of planning and advance consideration.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit extension.msstate.edu/beef