

Quality Matters

No matter what business you're in, quality brings value to your product. It's no different in the beef industry except the definition of quality may differ slightly from producer to producer or segment to segment. Gant Mourer, Oklahoma State University's Beef Value Enhancement Specialist oversees the Oklahoma Quality Beef Network, a program which allows beef producers opportunity to enhance a value added product by documenting a standardized set of health management inputs.

Calves that have the genetic potential to gain and gain efficiently would by most be considered the second most important trait a calf can have from a commercial producer's standpoint. The most important trait being, that a calf is healthy and maybe more specifically alive. Producers have the resources and information available to make genetic decisions to meet any environmental or market demands they choose. Many producers have also spent years selecting for their genetics but if they don't manage calves well in the short term it will be all for not and quality will then be lacking.

If a calf does not remain healthy it will never reach its genetic potential. The most critical point in life of that calf is at weaning and how that calf is handled at that time. Bovine Respiratory Disease is the #1 production problem costing the beef industry over \$900 million dollars annually (Chirase and Greene, 2001). The fact of the matter is that we have the ability to do something about it. When we compare cattle that we do not know the vaccination history to cattle that have been Vac-45 verified the morbidity of those cattle goes from 41.9% to 9.5% and mortality is reduced from 3.1% to effectively 0%, respectively (Step et al. 2008). While, the 2007 survey of cow/calf producers from the National Animal Health Monitoring System shows that over 60% of operations don't vaccinate for respiratory disease prior to shipment.

Castration is important to the health of the calf as well and stress can be minimized for that calf if castration is done young and while still on the ranch. Calves that have been castrated prior to entry into feedlots and backgrounding yards typically perform better and experience lower morbidity and mortality rates as compared to bulls castrated upon arrival (Massey et al., 2011). We see a 8-10\$/cwt discount for bulls in livestock markets do to the fact that the breakeven in feedlots is about 6% less for 6 weight steers that went through a preconditioning program prior to arrival (Maxwell et al., 2012).

These management practices coupled with good nutrition and parasite control on the ranch can keep a calf gaining and adding value. This last fall, the value of added gain was up over a dollar in many instances and with a decrease in feed values, preconditioning was able to increase the value of a calf from 50-100\$/hd depending on the program and how long a producer retained ownership. Cattle enrolled in a VAC-45 program also took advantage of premiums of 7-8\$/cwt, just because of the documented health history (OQBN, 2013). This third party documentation and verification can be done with any number of health programs across the United States.

One fundamental change we are currently witnessing in the industry right now is that buyers are looking for cattle that are well managed and documented. Buyers feel they are not paying premiums, but rather discounting cattle not properly managed. These well managed cattle are now the standard for cattle leaving the ranch. Buyers remember quality cattle and a ranch's reputation. Please feel free to stop by or contact me if I can be of assistance.

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