



Cut Calves Are Worth More

By Joe Snyder

Male beef calves are castrated to prevent physically and genetically inferior males from reproducing on cow/calf operations. Beef bulls are castrated in feeding operations to help reduce aggressive behavior and decrease riding activity. Reducing aggression by removing the testicles of male cattle protects them, other cattle in the herd and people who handle them.

There's also customer satisfaction: consumers prefer meat from steers because of better marbled, more tender and consistent, higher quality grade meat.

Castration upon arrival at the feedyard causes considerable stress. This increase in stress leads to decreased immune response and performance. A study done by Renfro (2004) indicates that male beef calves that arrived at the feedyard had 140% increase in respiratory disease incidence, 141% increase in death loss and 163% increase in railer rates compared to male calves that were castrated prior to arrival. Also, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has shown that medical costs are much higher for bulls compared to steers and the lower costs per pound that come with buying bulls are out-weighted by the decreased performance and increased sickness

of those animals. When the animals do become ill, the number of treatments and time of recovery tends to be lower in steers versus bulls.

Castration brings higher prices at market time, sometimes not in the form of a full premium so much as in the chance to avoid being discounted. This trend will only increase as cattle markets put more emphasis on value-based marketing of feeder calves. According to a study by the University of Tennessee, the amount of the discount for bulls may be as much as \$10/cwt or more, depending on time of year, weight of calf, etc. This amounts to a discount of \$25 to \$35 on a 500-pound bull calf. Some debate that this discount may not be enough to offset the losses due to decreased health and performance in bulls compared to steers.

Similarly, a survey conducted by Oklahoma State University showed that on average, bull calves were \$2 to \$3/cwt. less expensive than steers of similar weight. Other studies in other states indicate that bull calves are being discounted even more.

Don't Delay

Cattle should be castrated as soon as it is known that they won't be used for breeding stock. The checkoff-funded Beef Quality Assurance team strongly recommends that castration be done prior to 120

days of age or when calves weigh less than 500 pounds. Younger cattle are less physically developed and exhibit fewer signs of stress than more physically mature bulls. The older the calf gets, the more stress it experiences from castration. Kansas State University data shows that castrated calves ate less feed and gained at a rate of 50% of the non-castrate controls for a 28 day period.

Another reason to castrate as soon as possible is that the bleeding and infection that may result are less in younger calves. And younger calves are easier to handle and restrain than older, larger ones, especially during the first 36 hours of life, an ideal time for castration. Waiting to castrate calves in groups will work as long as all calves are castrated at less than three months of age.

The safest times to castrate are in the spring and fall when flies and maggots are less likely to increase irritation and infection of the wound.

In some beef operations, it is not practical to castrate calves at an early age because potential herd bull prospects will not be selected until after performance records are obtained following weaning, says Dan Thompson of Kansas State University. These are generally purebred herds and not applicable to commercial beef herds.

Calf Immunity

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Vaccination programs should be developed with the herd veterinarian. Type of vaccine, such as killed or modified live, timing, costs/benefits must be considered. Rigid recipes that fit all production units are impractical and even dangerous if not instituted in individual herds with professional care. Improper use of vaccine can lead to vaccine failure or even more dire consequences.

Vaccines are often ineffective when given to young



calves. Their immature immune systems may not be able to respond to the vaccine or antigen. Antibodies acquired from the dam through colostrum that protect the calf from many infectious diseases also may block and destroy the antigens in the vaccine.

Vaccinating calves for infectious bovine rhino-tracheitis (IBR), bovine virus diarrhea (BVD), parainfluenza-3 (PI-3), and bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV) is usually delayed until several months of age because of the problem of maternal antibody interference. Vaccinating young calves with nasal IBR/PI-3 avoids many of these problems.