

Cattle Business in Mississippi – October 2015

“Stocker Cents” article

Quality still pays

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With recent cattle prices, cattle producers across the board have seen record profits and record values for all feeder calves. However, recent shifts in the market have indicated that those record setting days may be behind us. I'll leave the price and market speculation to the economists, but will emphasize the importance now more than ever of producing a quality product. For beef producers in Mississippi, that product often means a quality feeder calf. A quality feeder calf is one that will remain healthy and perform well when stockered or fed. From a cow calf or stocker producer perspective there are several tried and true management practices that we know will add value to feeder calves.

Production of a quality feeder calf starts before that calf is conceived, with selection of good bulls and cows to produce those feeder calves. Genetics make up a large portion of a calf's potential phenotype, and represent something that producers can control at the start of the production cycle. This is as simple as selecting good bulls to breed to good cows, and managing those cows to raise a healthy calf. It is important to remember that a cow's nutritional state can have an effect on the lifetime productivity of her calf.

Several management strategies that can add value to feeder calves should be done before weaning if possible. These include castrating bull calves and dehorning calves at an early age. Research has shown that these practices are much less stressful on the animal when performed at a young age, and buyers are willing to pay a premium to have these practices done before calves reach the next step in the production cycle.

Preconditioning calves is a great example of adding quality to feeder calves, and in turn adding value. The preconditioning period typically lasts 45-60 days after weaning, and is characterized by nutritional and management practices designed to help calves perform well in the next phase. A more in depth discussion of preconditioning programs can be found in Mississippi State University Extension Service Publication 2578, “Beef Calf Preconditioning Programs”. Two major parts of a preconditioning program are health and nutrition. A health program should always be planned in advance with your veterinarian, and should include a good vaccination protocol and a parasite (both internal and external) control program. Often this will include vaccination for respiratory and clostridial pathogens.

When considering the nutritional portion of a pre-conditioning program, consider that calves may be naïve to feed, and when undergoing the stress of weaning their feed consumption will often decrease. A nutritional program should always be developed to complement your forage base, and should consider the low intake of calves early on by offering a diet that is more nutrient dense (i.e. contains a higher percentage of protein and energy). This program should also offer feeds that are palatable that calves will readily come to the bunk to eat. Be sure this feed is easily and readily accessible, as some calves will not come to the bunk immediately, and offer feed at consistent times.

It is important to remember that after you have produced and are ready to sell your high quality feeder calves you must tell someone! To capture value and higher returns from management practices, use marketing strategies that provide opportunities to capture the value of these

practices. Marketing is an essential component of any effort to add value to your cattle. It includes all of the activities involved in getting cattle and beef from the ranch gate into the hands of the final consumer. Details on feeder calf marketing alternatives appear in Mississippi State University Extension Service Publication 2552, "Marketing Feeder Calves".

For beef producers, production and marketing are closely related. The type of cattle being produced and management practices used in the production process both directly impact prices received for cattle. They also affect which calf marketing alternatives are feasible. For example, specific pre- and post-weaning management protocols may have to be followed in order to be able to market cattle in special sales designated for certified preconditioned calves.

In any industry, quality is valuable, and buyers are willing to pay for practices that inherently add quality to feeder calves. As beef cow numbers grow, buyers will have the ability to offer larger premiums for quality calves and in turn larger discount for calves that do not meet their specifications. Another closing thought to keep in mind is the consumer's desire to know more about how their food is produced. Consumers are constantly questioning production practices and management strategies. One way to show consumers that we are indeed producing a quality beef product is to become Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified. There are several trainings being offered throughout the state in through the end of the year!

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit <http://msucares.com/livestock/beef/index.html>