

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Beef Quality Assurance for Cow Operators

by Dave Sparks, DVM

Much has been said about Beef Quality Assurance in recent years, but how many of us really know what it is and why it is important to all beef producers? Simply put, BQA is the effort to instruct beef producers, and their workers, as to ways that they can produce a high quality and wholesome product that keeps the consumer coming back for more.

While great strides have been made with fed cattle, cow operators have a ways to go. In feedlots a few people are handling large numbers of cattle, and feedback from the processor is fairly simple. In cow country, many more people are handling smaller numbers of cattle, and the feedback, while real, is not so obvious. Injection site lesions in the sirloin are one measure of the care with which cattle are processed and medicated. From 1995 to 1999 the feedlot industry reduced these lesions from 12% of fed carcasses to less than 2%. In 1999 however, over 40% of all cow and bull carcasses had lesions in the sirloin. Too often cow operators see the cow as a calf production unit rather than a part of the food chain. The fact is, about ¼ of the beef consumed in our country comes from cull cows and bulls and it is not all hamburger. Today, the better cuts such as the round, sirloin, loin, and ribeye allow the packers to pay better cow prices than we have seen in years past. Culls represent about ¼ of the gross income for most cow operators. If we, as an industry, could reduce the annual carcass losses due to bruising, injection lesions, excess fat trim, and condemnation due to drug residues, what would be your part of the extra ½ billion dollars on the table? Cow buyers are aware of what this waste costs, and they know what herds, areas, and sales most of the problems come from. When your culls come through the ring you need as many hands in the air as possible.

Proper techniques when handling and processing cattle can go a long way. Use the smallest needle that will do the job and change it at least every 10 head. Dull needles cause more lesions, and a needle that fatigues and breaks off is a serious problem. While injection site lesions are trimmed away when found, they make the whole cut of meat tougher due to extra connective tissue deposited in the muscle. Be sure to give all injections in front of the shoulder, and when

you have a choice, give injections subcutaneously. Reduce bruising by eliminating overcrowding and make sure loading facilities are safe and cattle flow through them easily. Market culls before lameness and eye problems get severe, or barren cows get overly fat.

Proper drug and vaccine usage can be summed up with 5 words, “Read the label,” and “Keep records.” Drug residue problems result when dosage, course of treatment, or route of administration are not according to the label, or withdrawal time before slaughter are not adhered to. According to law, all violations are the responsibility of the producer, so if you have a problem not only are the future prices you receive affected, but you will be subject to possible fines and/or quarantine. If you do have a violation, if you can produce proper treatment records officials are likely to work with you to help identify and solve the problem. Without records, they may well resort to sterner measures.

As Americans we have the safest and most wholesome meat in the world, but we need to constantly work to keep it that way. Beef is still “What’s for Dinner” today, but we need to make sure it’s on the menu tomorrow too.

Results of Adjusting Feed Levels for Cows During Cold Weather

by Glenn Selk

Many years ago, a northern Oklahoma rancher told about his method of maintaining body condition on fall-calving cows during the course of the winter. He watched the weather forecasts closely and increased the amount of supplement that he fed to the cows for about one day before a winter weather event and during the winter storm. Then he would return the supplement pattern back to pre-storm levels when the weather returned more to normal. For example, if he was feeding 5 pounds of a 20% range cube, he would increase that to 7 pounds per head during the wet, cold spell. Then he would return the level to 5 pounds when the weather returns to normal. Of course, his cattle had free-choice access to adequate standing native forage or grass hay. Note that cow size may require that supplement levels need to be adjusted accordingly. (This rancher had moderate sized 1100 pound cows in the 1970’s when this was his “rule of thumb”.)

Research about this subject bears out this rancher’s observations. Results from an experiment at Kansas State University suggests several advantages for adjusting energy levels for cold weather. This information was gathered during the 1979 - 1980 winter. The K-State researchers used 60 commercial cows fed in dry lot and fed one-half of the cows a steady diet based upon the thermal neutral requirements for body weight maintenance; the other 30 cows were fed a ration adjusted for 1% more feed for each degree of coldness. Thermal neutral is generally considered to have its lower limits at 32 degrees wind chill index on cows with dry hair coats. For each 1 degree decrease in wind chill index, the feed would be increased 1%. Beef cows exposed to cold require more energy for maintenance therefore the results below indicate the effectiveness of making those adjustments.

Impact of adjusting winter ration for changes in weather

	Ration Adjusted for coldness	Ration NOT adjusted
Weight change during last 4.5 months of gestation	+115 pounds	+26 pounds
Weight change from fall to following fall at weaning	+10 pounds	-93 pounds
Percent cycling by 60 days after average calving date	82%	65%
Estimated date of conception in subsequent breeding season	June 5	June 15

Source: Ames, D. R. 1981. "Weather, what can you do about it?" in Western Beef Symposium October 26-27, 1981. Boise, Idaho.

The amount of additional feed (in the Kansas State study) to account for the cold weather events that winter would be equivalent to 125 pounds of corn per cow. The current high prices of winter supplements must be considered when adjusting the ration to match the weather. **HOWEVER**, the higher prices of calves in 2007 – 2008, means that every advantage to improve calf crop percentage or weaning weight should be utilized.

Happy Thanksgiving!!!

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