COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

September 7, 2010

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OQBN, An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Have you ever heard someone say that preconditioning calves doesn't pay? Have you ever said it yourself? In the past you were probably right but things are changing fast. The Oklahoma Quality Beef Network had been marketing preconditioned calves for several years now, but lately it has really come into its own. Stocker and feeder operators are recognizing the added value, and the demand for verified preconditioned calves is outpacing the supply. The key ingredient, however, is numbers. There is very little added value in a handful of preconditioned calves if the feeder has to throw them together with other calves to make a load or a pen of calves. When sufficient numbers of similarly treated calves come together at one sale, the whole picture changes, even if these calves come from several sellers.

Life is hard for a conventionally weaned and marketed calf when he leaves home. He is dealing with the stress of weaning, shipping, comingling, and diet change all at the same time. He probably hasn't had any vaccinations, or if he has, they haven't had time to work, so he is coping with limited immune

protection. He also is likely not consuming enough to meet his nutritional requirements, walking to exhaustion, bawling until he loses his voice, and breathing dirt. Health losses for these calves can be staggering. Death loss is just the tip of the iceberg. Treatment costs for sick calves can be more than the calf can ever make up. Research has shown that calves with health problems, even if they recover, will never perform as well resulting in poor gains, high feed costs, and poor carcass scores. This results in tremendous loss to the industry. Many feeders have recognized this and are willing to share these dollars left on the table with the cow-calf producer, but only when they know the exact program the calf has had.

The statement that a calf is weaned and has had his shots has no value to a buyer. That may mean that he has been away from his mother just long enough to quit bawling and has had a shot of something. This calf, in fact, often is a worse health risk than the one fresh off of the cow because he may be just ready to get sick. Research has shown that in weaning calves there is something magic about 45 days. This gives the calf long enough to develop strong immunity from the vaccines he is given, time for his nutritional status to come back to a good level, and time for his immune system to manufacture more building blocks and recover from the suppression associated with weaning. Calves that are weaned on the ranch start much easier because they don't have the additional stresses of shipping and comingling added to the stress of weaning. The cow-calf operator also has the option to see that good vaccination protection and nutritional levels are in place before they are needed by vaccinating when calves are still on the cow and by teaching calves to eat high energy feeds before they are weaned.

So, does "value-added" really add value? Last year calves sold at OQBN sales brought a price premium of $8.12 per cwt over similar non-program calves sold the same day. The premium was even greater on the lighter classes. Additionally, these calves had an extra 45 days to grow than their counterparts that were marketed at weaning. Instead of arriving at the sale barn walking and bawling, they get off the truck looking to fill up and relax. These factors combined for much greater pay weights. Sometimes life can be about as hard for the cowman as it is for his weaned calf. Maybe it is time to start marketing our calves instead of selling them, and OQBN is positioned to help do so. The feeders are ready to pay for what they need if you are willing to deliver it. OQBN has 10 sales scheduled across the state this fall and winter, but to take advantage of the program you must make plans in time to wean your calves before cut-off dates. To find out if this program can work for you contact Doug McKinney at Oklahoma State University Department of Animal Science (doug.mckinney@okstate.edu) or visit with your OSU County Extension Office.

Testing Hay Can Save Supplement Dollars

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Professor Emeritus

Forage analysis can be a useful tool to remove some of the mystery concerning the hay that producers will feed this winter. Testing the grass hays this year for protein and energy content will help the producer design winter supplementation programs most appropriate for the forage supply that is available. Any of the potential nitrate accumulating hays should be tested for nitrate concentration.

Forage quality has two important benefits to cows or heifers. First higher quality forages contain larger concentrations of important nutrients so animals consuming these forages should be more likely to meet their nutrient needs from the forages. Secondly, and just as important, animals can consume a larger quantity of higher quality forages. Higher quality forages are fermented more rapidly in the rumen leaving a void that the animal can fill with additional forage. Consequently, forage intake increases. For example, low quality forages (below about 6% crude protein) will be consumed at about 1.5% of body weight (on a dry matter basis) per day. Higher quality grass hays (above 8% crude protein) may be consumed at about 2.0% of body weight. Excellent forages, such as good alfalfa, silages, or green pasture may be consumed at the rate of 2.5% of body weight per day. The combination of increased nutrient content AND increased forage intake makes high quality forage very valuable to the animal and the producer.

The value of forage testing can best be illustrated by comparing the supplement needed to meet the nutrient needs of cows in the winter. Assume we are feeding hay to a 1200 pound spring-calving cow in late gestation. She needs 1.9 pounds of crude protein to meet her needs and that of the growing fetus. If she consumes 2.0% of her body weight in a low quality grass hay (4.0% Crude Protein) she will receive 0.96 pounds of protein from the hay leaving a deficiency of 0.94 pounds of protein needed from the supplement. To meet her protein needs with a 30% crude protein supplement would require 3.13 pounds of supplement each day. However, if the same cow was consuming a higher quality grass hay (7.0% Crude Protein), then she receives 1.68 pounds of protein from the hay and must be given enough supplement to meet the 0.22 pounds that is lacking. Now, to meet her needs the cow only needs 0.73 pounds of the same supplement per day. Because of the difference in hay quality the supplement needs vary by 4 fold!

There are several good methods of sampling hay for forage analysis. Most nutritionists would prefer to use a mechanical coring probe made specifically for this purpose. The coring probe is usually a stainless steel tube with a serrated, cutting edge. It is 1 inch in diameter and is designed to fit on a 1/2 inch drill

or brace. Cordless drills make these tools quite mobile so that the hay bales to be tested do not have to be hauled to be near an electrical outlet. The hay samples are place in paper or plastic bags for transfer to a forage testing laboratory. Cores are taken from several bales at random to obtain a representative sample to be analyzed.

Grab samples can also be obtained and tested. To receive the best information, grab several samples by hand from about 6 inches into the open side of the bale or the middle third of a small round bale. Place all of the sample in the bag. Do not discard weeds or stems, just because they look undesirable. They are still part of the hay that you are offering to the livestock. Be certain to label the forage samples accurately and immediately, in order for the laboratory analysis to be correctly assigned to the proper hay piles or bales. Obviously the more samples that are sent to the laboratory for analysis, the more information can be gained. Just as obvious is the fact that as the number of samples increase, the cost of forage testing increases.

Samples can be taken to the OSU County Extension office near you and then sent to the OSU Soil, Water, and Forage Testing laboratory in Agricultural Hall on the campus at Stillwater. There are other commercial laboratories available in the Oklahoma City area that also do an excellent job of forage analysis.