

Preparing Calves for Success: Health, Vaccination, and Branding Done Right

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We have all heard it said that luck is created when opportunity meets preparation. Certainly, there are many things out of your control at the ranch. Weather and markets are two things we talk about the most, but we can control the least. However, there are some risks we face that we can prepare for and be in the best possible position when the opportunity arises. There is always an element of randomness in biology that could be called luck. However, we do know that your calves will face disease challenges. Have you prepared them to meet that challenge?

The first 12 hours of a calf's life are critical to its lifetime performance. Calves are born with little passive immunity. Absorption of antibodies from colostrum decreases within 12 hours of birth. Research has demonstrated that even a delay of 2 to 6 hours after birth increases calf morbidity. It's probably late in the calving season for many of you, but colostrum intake within the first 2 hours is worth keeping in mind.

The next opportunity for many ranchers to impact calf health and gain is at branding. Working the calves at 2-3 months of age is recommended in the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines. Respiratory and Clostridial-related disease are the biggest threats to your calves. It is important to seek guidance from your veterinarian on specific vaccine protocol, but vaccine handling is just as critical (or more so) than vaccine selection.

Branding time can be chaotic, but take the time to do it right. Often, the least experienced person is given the most important jobs. Maintain the recommended temperatures with your vaccines before and during the vaccination process. Direct sunlight is also detrimental to vaccine effectiveness. Commercial coolers are available to keep vaccines out of the sun and at the right temperature while in the vaccine gun.

The route of administration is also critical. Most vaccines can be given subcutaneously, and this is preferred, but some require intramuscular injection. Always follow the label directions. Vaccine handling is very well laid out in the BQA manual. In short, vaccine failure is most often a man-made problem.

Dehorning and castration are necessary but potentially stressful events. Once again, training is the key. Castration before 3 months of age is less stressful and has quicker healing times than in older animals. Several methods can be employed successfully. With all methods, clean, well-maintained (sharp) equipment is a must. Good restraining techniques that reduce the risk of injury to the animal and people are important. The same can be said for dehorning. Younger animals with small horn buds handle this potential stressor very quickly. Older calves take much longer to heal and have a higher risk of production loss.

Branding is also a good time to administer growth-promoting implants. They have been proven effective for calf weight gain, with weaning weights increased by 20 pounds per head or more. There is very little evidence to suggest that heifers implanted at branding have a reduced conception rate as a yearling. The bottom line is that unless you are being paid through an all-natural program, you should use implants at branding. Once again, proper implanting techniques as outlined in the BQA manual are critical for implant effectiveness.

The BQA manual is an excellent source of information. All those working hands-on with livestock should take the time to be BQA certified. Not only does this knowledge help in everyday operations, but it is also a good signal to our customers that we care enough to do it right.

You WILL have opportunities to impact calf-health and gain, resulting in more pounds to sell this fall. Are you prepared to maximize all the weather and markets give you!! Good Luck or better yet, Be Prepared!!

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