

# AG NEWS & VIEWS



LIVESTOCK

## Tips for a Successful Weaning and Preconditioning Season

by Robert Wells, Ph.D., livestock consultant | [rswells@noble.org](mailto:rswells@noble.org)



greater profit back to the ranch than stripping and selling a bawling calf. Feedlot buy-

**F**or those producers who have a defined spring calving season, weaning the calf crop is just around the corner. There is a sizable amount of data and literature that demonstrates preconditioning calves will return a

greater profit back to the ranch than stripping and selling a bawling calf. Feedlot buyers are becoming more selective and are rewarding cattle producers with proper vaccination and preconditioning programs (or discounting those who don't). The following tips are designed to help producers be more successful during the preconditioning phase of calf development.

### PLAN EARLY.

This is especially warranted if you will need additional, off-farm help. Contact the people you will work with, including your veterinarian, early so you can

pick the date you prefer to work calves. Additionally, some vaccines or medicine may become in shorter supply locally if you wait until closer to the time you and your neighbors start to wean calves.

### STOCKPILE FORAGES IN THE WEANING TRAP/PASTURE.

This will ensure you have adequate quantity and quality of standing grass for the newly weaned calves to eat and bed in during the preconditioning phase. You will most



likely have to start this process in August, but it's not too late to allow the forages a chance to recover and grow now. This will also reduce the amount of dust the calves could inhale compared to a dry lot situation.

**DEVELOP A MARKETING PLAN.** Know your marketing strategy by the time you get ready to wean the calves. Identify a branded program that you can affiliate with, such as the Integrity Beef Alliance ([www.integritybeef.org](http://www.integritybeef.org)), to help differentiate your calves from others being sold at the same time of year. If not affiliated with a third-party calf program, you will want to make sure there are other value-added calves being sold on the same day and market as your calves. Buyers need to be able to put together large gooseneck trailer and semitruck loads of same sex and similar type and weight calves. If you deliver 50 head of mixed calves to the local market and are the only one who has value-added calves on that day, don't expect to receive a premium for them. There is simply not enough to make a load for the buyer, and the calves will get mixed with other calves that have not received additional management. Remember that when the height of the fall weaning season is in full swing, markets typically will have a price drop when a large supply of calves move to market. Unless you see outside influences on prices, try not to get too wrapped up in the market decline at this time. Typically, prices will recover after the supply dwindles somewhat later in the fall/early winter. Preconditioning helps move your marketing to a better time of year with fewer calves going to market.

**CONSIDER RISK PROTECTION OF THE CALF CROP.** It may not be too late to

consider some sort of financial risk protection for the calf crop. Visit with a financial adviser who is familiar with agricultural commodity markets or an agricultural economist to help make the decision of what, how and when to purchase risk protection.

**PROCURE FEED AND QUALITY HAY.** Give yourself time to buy and the feed dealer time to deliver the feed and hay that will be needed for the preconditioning phase of calf development. Plan to feed the highest quality hay to the calves you have while you have them caught up during the bawling-out period. They will not be very interested in spending a lot of time eating, so what they do eat needs to be as nutritious as possible. Planning ahead also allows you time to shop for the best feed deals and best quality hay available in your area.

**CHECK SUPPLIES.** Make sure vaccines, even if recently purchased, are not expired. Check the function of vaccine guns – easy to use, no blow-by of product, clean and in good repair. Check the squeeze chute, gates and fences to ensure they are ready for cattle working day. Do you have extra pins for ear taggers and enough transfer and injection needles? It is always a good idea to have extra supplies (ear tags and studs, vaccines, needles, syringes, anthelmintics, rope, parts for squeeze chute, etc.) on hand to prevent the need to make an unscheduled trip to town on working day.

**MOVE HERD CLOSER TO FACILITIES IN ADVANCE.** This will reduce the stress of hauling or driving cattle over far distances on weaning day. This affords you to have more time to actually process the cattle. Working calves through the chute in a slower, more deliberate fashion will

create a less stressful environment for the calves and workers.

**START AND FINISH AS EARLY IN THE DAY AS POSSIBLE.** During September and October, the days can still get pretty warm. It is never a good idea to extend calf working into the heat of the day, especially if there is a high probability of temperatures above 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

**FENCE LINE WEAN THE CALVES.** If possible, fence line weaning is one of the lowest stress methods. Alternatively, or in addition to the fence line weaning, the use of nose flaps prior to the physical weaning process can reduce calf and cow stress as the calf will be weaned off the need/desire for milk. Nose flaps also help reduce the calf's emotional dependence on the cow.

**PLAN AND SCHEDULE TRANSPORTATION OF THE CALVES TO MARKET.** Using an air-ride semitruck is less stressful on the calves than a bumper pull or gooseneck trailer, especially if your trailer is equipped with a spring suspension. If you don't have enough calves for a semitruck load, consider finding others in your area who also need trucking and share a truck. The cost of commercial transportation can easily be overcome when considering your time, wear and tear on your equipment, potential for breakdowns (trailer tire flats and blowouts are common occurrences), and shrink of calves from hauling in less-than-adequate equipment.

There are numerous other considerations you should think about prior to and during weaning to ensure a successful weaning season. The above tips are some of the more common issues I typically see with producers on an annual basis. Remember the old adage: prior planning prevents poor performance. 🇺🇸