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Weaning Checklist

Late summer and early fall can be a busy time on the ranch, particularly with those who have multiple calving groups. Summer calving is wrapping up with breeding occurring, fall calving is getting underway and weaning of the spring calving herd will be happening soon. Research has proven that low stress cattle handling and proper vaccination helps calves perform later as stockers and/or in the feedyard. Following a checklist for successful weaning can help to make the process as low stress and profitable as possible. For additional information Oklahoma State University has an excellent newer fact sheet on this topic titled ["Calf Preconditioning: A Comprehensive Overview" AFS-3039](#).

There are specialty marketing programs that have specific calf management requirements, but in general calves need to be castrated, dehorned, have been administered basic pre-conditioning vaccines, be bunk broke and weaned a minimum number of days – typically 45. Traceability to the ranch of origin, more natural management practices and explicit breed makeups, can all add value to specific programs.

Most vaccination schedules include two rounds of a Clostridial vaccine (Blackleg), two rounds of a 5-way Respiratory vaccine (BRD), and 1 round of a Mannheimia haemolytica and/or Pasteurella vaccine (Shipping Fever). All vaccines should be given according to label instructions. Use caution with modified live products on suckling calves, if dams are unvaccinated or of unknown vaccination status, as abortion can be a possible side effect. Internal and external parasite control is another consideration, if warranted, at weaning time. Always work with your herd health veterinarian for a plan targeted to your herd and situation.

The weaning environment makes a big difference in the health status of calves. Initially putting calves in a familiar pen or trap with some shade will help smooth the weaning transition. Ensure that newly weaned calves are not put into a hot, dusty dry lot and always have plenty of water accessible. Weaning in an environment as close to possible as what the calves have been raised on has real health and animal comfort benefits.

Weaning nutrition is one of the most important factors to pay attention to. Provide calves with palatable, familiar feeds with a greater concentration of nutrition to compensate for low intake. Some may choose to supplement protein on a forage-based diet, others choose total mixed rations. No matter what the approach, feeds and forages for newly weaned calves should be highly palatable. Start calves on a ration at 1% of body weight and increase slowly over several weeks.

All the prior discussion can have direct impact on profitability of the operation, but protecting against death loss and market volatility is a weaning time consideration for profitability as well. In some situations, it might make sense to market early following the weaning period. Other times it might make more sense to background calves to a later end point for various reasons, including feed availability and tax management. In either case, consider Livestock Risk Protection (LRP) to guarantee a calf value that preserves operational profit.