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Early Castration Benefits

Spring branding and pasture turn-out have been happening or will happen very soon on cattle operations all across the Midwest. One of the common tasks to accomplish in this process is castration of bull calves. Everyone has their management approach to this procedure; either at birth, branding, weaning or later, but studies show benefits to early castration. One saying that has always stuck with me is “the longer they are attached, the more attached they are to them”. Today let’s look at the data that points to why this saying is a valid one.

Bulls get a bad rap on the ability to handle them. This is true, steers are generally easier to handle than bulls. Castration helps minimize aggressive behavior which eases handling stress and injury potential for people, as well as reducing the potential for damage to facilities.

An argument for keeping bull calves intact is for increased growth performance. While bulls may produce marginally higher yield in pounds, they also produce lower quality carcasses. Steers deposit intramuscular fat earlier and more evenly than bulls and that is particularly true in areas like the loin, where higher value cuts are sourced. Steer meat tends to be more tender when compared to finished bulls.

Beef Quality Assurance guidelines recommend castration as early in life as possible. Castration at birth is the gold standard, but preferably before 90 days of age has real benefits. The earlier in a calf’s life that castration is done, the less stressful it is for the animal and the faster the recovery from lost production performance. Time-tested hormonal implants are an economical way to compensate for performance as well. Early castration also leads to healthier cattle as they move from the ranch to stocker operations and feedlots. These are all positives, from both a production perspective and an animal welfare perspective.

Research done by Dr. Hilton points out that the negative performance impacts of castration after 6 months of age never goes away. ([*“Castration of beef calves: What does the science say about timing and technique?”*](#)) Late castration can also be more time and labor intensive and carries higher injury risks for both cattle and cattlemen. Younger, smaller calves are easier to handle, and castration can often be done at birth or implemented alongside other management practices, like branding, tagging or vaccinations. Later castration not only carries higher infection risks, but it also impacts carcass quality down the road.

Another real factor is the economics of castration. The average cost of castration is approximately \$5 per head. Work out of the University of Tennessee showed that over a ten-year period, the average reduction in per cwt price for bulls versus steers, ranged from \$6.87 on four weights to just under \$18 for eight hundred pounders. Other work has shown a discount in the \$7-12/cwt range, so the price discount at the auction market is real. A simple way to increase market value is to steer calves, ideally early in life, and a very logical return on a \$5 investment.

Adding all the benefits together of; safer handling, better health, reduced stress, offset in performance with implants, increased carcass value and marketing value, the choice to castrate earlier in life versus later seems to be a logical one when looking at the science.