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Nursing Calf Implanting

Last week we looked at the value of early castration and the return on investment for hormonal implants was mentioned. There has been a wealth of documented research proving that implants are a good practice to incorporate into a production system. There are reasons not to implant, like marketing programs such as natural or organic, but today will focus on implanting the suckling calf. Oklahoma State has an excellent publication titled "[*Implants and Their Use in Beef Cattle Production*](#)" to learn more.

The term "implant" refers to a group of products used to increase the rate and efficiency of growth. Implants contain natural or synthetic compounds that produce physiological responses in animals similar to natural hormones. Implants are typically made of compressed powder shaped into a small pellet. The pellet is placed, or implanted, under the skin on the backside of the ear.

Implanting nursing calves is a cost-effective way to increase weaning weight. A 4 to 6% improvement in gain has been reported by implanting nursing calves, according to research from Oklahoma State University. This could translate to an additional 15 to 30 pounds of weaning weight and in today's market's that is a very good return on a few dollars invested in the implant!

Implants can be quickly administered at branding, along with other vaccinations. Keep in mind a few considerations for use. No implants are approved for calves less than 30 to 45 days-of-age. Research indicates that one implant between 2 months-of-age and weaning has little impact on future productive performance of heifers. However, if replacement heifers are selected early, implantation is not recommended. Additionally, bull calves should not be implanted, as it can negatively impact reproductive development.

Calves being implanted should be consuming a high-quality diet to maximize the effect of the implant. Implanting at branding time is convenient, but the typical fall weaning time will extend past the beneficial effects of traditional calf implants. If re-implanting is an option, that is recommended somewhere around two months after initial implant, or there are extended-release products that are a viable option as well.

A common concern is that an implant utilized in the suckling calf can negatively impact post-weaning performance. Multiple studies have provided evidence that a suckling implant does not reduce subsequent feedlot performance, and the weaning weight advantage was maintained at slaughter. This is especially impactful as the whole industry benefits from additional pounds of product.

Proper placement is fundamental to the success of the implant, regardless of brand. Correct implanting technique includes a few considerations. Appropriate restraint of the calf to ensure that the implant is applied correctly and that risk of injury for both animals and people is paramount. Ears should be free of dirt and manure; if needed, scrub them with a disinfectant prior to implanting. Disinfectants should be used between animals to clean the needle.

Not all implants are designed the same. Make sure the correct implant gun is being used for the type of implants being used. Needles must be sharp and secured to the gun. Implants should be placed between the skin and cartilage in the middle third of the back of the ear. After implant is inserted, withdrawing the implant gun should allow the user to see and feel the implant if placed correctly.