

Bluestem Breezes  
Karaline Mayer  
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## **Preconditioning for Profit**

This week, K-State Extension Feedlot Specialist Chris Reinhardt discusses the opportunities available to increase profit during the calf preconditioning phase. Keep in mind that not every marketing scenario works for every producer. I'll continue to encourage you to look for the niche, the marketing opportunity that exists to increase your operation's margins. Here are Dr. Reinhardt's thoughts:

Vaccine and antimicrobial technologies continue to improve at a breakneck pace. Yet we continue to see that calves which are unprepared for life in the feedlot and which undergo significant stress during and after weaning en route to the feedlot will have morbidity upwards of 30% and first treatment success is often only about 50%. Calves which get mild respiratory disease in the feedlot will have 0.2-0.4 lbs lower ADG and those calves requiring multiple treatments for respiratory disease will gain 0.6 lbs less for the entire feeding period. This translates to about 15 lb less carcass weight and 10-15% fewer choice carcasses. It pays to keep calves healthy.

Preconditioning can mean different things to different people, from giving calves a single vaccination prior to weaning, all the way up to 2 full rounds of vaccination, before and after weaning, weaning the calves from their dams for 45 to 60 days, and transitioning the calves onto a total mixed ration, eating from feedbunks, and drinking from waterers. As far as animal performance is concerned, the extent of preconditioning needed to minimize problems at the feedlot and maximize feedlot performance depends on the extent of stress imposed on the calf during transition.

Recent studies here at K-State suggest that single-source calves shipped 4 hours to a feedlot will benefit from pre-weaning vaccination, weaning, and feeding for at least 2 weeks before shipment to the feedlot. However, if calves are going to be shipped more than 8 hours from home, they will be commingled with other sources of calves either in transit or upon arrival at the feedlot, and are likely to experience adverse weather conditions during the transition period to the feedlot, vaccination and weaning for 6-8 weeks before shipment would be preferred.

Investing time, technology, and labor into the calf crop has very real costs for the rancher. But the high purchase price of weaned calves entering the feedlot means the financial risk of respiratory disease and the uncertainty that respiratory disease causes feedlot producers has very real costs as well. Many feedlot producers are willing to pay ranchers a premium to mitigate some of this disease risk which causes the feedlot economic uncertainty---consider it "biological risk management." When certified preconditioned calves are sold at special preconditioned calf sales, they have the potential to bring significant premiums over non-preconditioned, "commodity" calves.

The decline in calf prices over the past year or so has drained a substantial amount of dollars from the sale value of weaned calves. Preconditioning and effective targeted marketing of your value-added calves to buyers willing to pay for this value has the potential to gain much of that lost income opportunity back.

Respiratory disease is the most costly disease in the cattle industry, and the greatest factor affecting calf performance in the feedlot. If you can prevent or control disease, you can, to a certain extent, control performance of calves. Feedlots are paying premiums for calves which are prepared for life at the feedlot. Why? Because they perform and are predictable---predictability is the opposite of risk. As a rancher, you can and should get paid for your investments of time, money, and management.

For more information visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; [kamayer@ksu.edu](mailto:kamayer@ksu.edu); 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out [wabaunsee.ksu.edu](http://wabaunsee.ksu.edu).