Keys To Success In Stocker Production

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There are several economic advantages to retaining raised calves or purchasing calves and selling them later in groups at heavier weights. These stocker (growing calves on pasture) or backgrounding (growing calves using mixed feeds or stored forages) programs add value to cattle for feedlots because they desire cattle that are weaned, are from a minimum of suppliers, are familiar with feed bunks and water sources and have minimal health issues.

The aforementioned desires expressed by feedlot cattle buyers explain the considerable discounts that lightweight, unweaned bull calves sold in one-head lots receive at livestock auctions. Short-term (35- to 45-day) pre-conditioning programs add value to calves because these programs provide evidence the calves being marketed 1) are weaned, 2) have been processed (dehorned, castrated, dewormed and vaccinated) and 3) are familiar with feed sources. By adding additional weight on calves with longer-term ownership, more value is added to the calves because heavier cattle require fewer days to finish and typically finish at more acceptable body weight. Regardless of the type of backgrounding program, marketing decisions must be well thought out so that the greatest benefit can be gained from the time and money committed to this enterprise.

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One advantage of growing retained calves to heavier weights to be sold directly to feed yards is the reputation of your cattle. Bull purchasing decisions, breed makeup and carcass performance all can be bid into the price of the cattle; but poor choices in breed makeup and bull selection, a bad reputation for performance and carcass quality can also be bid into the price of the cattle.

Purchase of additional calves can increase profitability of the operation, but care should be taken to purchase the types of cattle that will gain quickly, have minimal health problems and have breed makeup and color pattern that bring top dollar at sale. It is also essential to have adequate facilities to process, sort, catch, load and doctor retained and purchased stocker calves.

One common wreck that occurs is receiving purchased cattle in the same facilities as the retained calves. Calves retained from the home ranch should have virtually no health problems, but to bring in and co-mingle purchased cattle with ranch calves exposes the ranch calves to every disease that the purchased calves were exposed to, practically ensuring health problems in ranch calves as well as purchased calves.

Health is one of the primary issues defining performance and profitability. If the initial cost of a set of stocker calves is $500/calf for every 1 percent death loss there is a $5/head cost that must be made up when cattle are sold. An even larger problem may stem from the number of cattle that are chronic with respiratory disease. Chronics will not perform as well as healthy cattle, they are not worth as much as healthy cattle, and they use up the same amount of resources as healthy cattle, along with the cost of medicines used to "save" the animal. Because death loss and chronic morbidity is such an expensive problem, fresh or incoming cattle must be watched carefully and treated as soon as clinical signs are identified.

The performance of stocker calves is much more sensitive to forage quality and stocking rate than other classes of livestock. Wheat forage commonly contains 25 to 30 percent crude protein and 75 to 85% digestibility; this level of protein and energy is adequate to meet the nutritional requirements of a stocker calf gaining over 3 pounds per day. Summer grasses often lack the digestibility to provide adequate energy for high levels of gain. In order for a calf to gain 2 pounds per day, diet digestibility should be 67 percent or greater. Often calves grazing summer grasses gain only 1.5 pounds per day or less without supplementation. Fertilization of warm-season grass pastures increases the crude protein content and increases forage growth by 30 pounds of forage for every pound of actual N applied. The additional forage growth must be utilized to maintain forage quality and avoid waste.

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