

Black Ink

Quality In The Fast Lane

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At the local café two cattlemen are discussing the idea of compensatory gain.

"I heard you can make money on calves this winter if you just get by, save by not feeding much. Come spring, nature will provide a few more

groceries and the calves will make up for it," one says.

"Makes no sense to me," the other retorts. "If you look at anything else in farming, from poultry to hogs, corn or wheat, it's maximum production all the way."

The cattle industry's segments are often poorly linked. Traditionally, stockers or backgrounders held the option of "roughing" calves through the winter. The calves made up for lost time – compensated – when they hit the feedlot, but at the cost of beef quality.

That kind of wintering fell out of favor a few years ago when quality beef premiums soared, but some producers are taking a look back now because of relatively high feed prices and general market uncertainty.

At the café, the first producer agrees. Thinking of his crop enterprises, he says, "Yeah, I guess we don't withhold nitrogen from a corn plant for 30 days for compensatory gain or try to delay getting water to the soybeans."

To be fair, beef cattle offer some flexibility, and there are half a dozen reasons why plans may include low-gain wintering, from tax benefits to marketing options. But many producers could realize an advantage to speeding up the process.

First, know why you're in the race. Then think about the checkpoints on the way to a finish line of profitable, higher quality beef.

After breeding, the next big decisions start with weaning. When and how are the questions, and in a fast-paced scenario it's the sooner the better. Scientists suggest a target of 90 to 150 days for "early weaning." If you're not ready for that part of the race, just keep in mind studies show it has many advantages, like better feed efficiency, higher quality beef and reduced cow costs.

The other question is tougher. To load up bawling calves and send them down the road could be expedient, but this is no time for short cuts. It's a relatively short period of time when speed can take a back seat to quality. Starting calves on creep prior to weaning sets them up

for a healthy start in the lot because the calves already know how to eat. That reduces stress and, therefore, sickness.

Regardless of how you market your calves, those are health bonuses. Pre-conditioned calves bring more at the salebarn and if you retain ownership, you'll reap the rewards later through both performance and carcass merit.

Historically, the stocker phase comes next, partly because the cattle of yesterday needed some added frame. Today's fast-growing, larger-framed cattle may not get as big without doing time as a stocker, but that's not all bad.

The foodservice sector rates ribeye size among its top concerns. Taking more time to produce more beef is not always better when you're cutting steaks to fit on a plate. Besides, current studies have shown that a decreased plane of nutrition after weaning decreases marbling potential.

If cattle have been held back, feeding them longer in the lot won't recoup the quality grade. Marbling deposition starts early and they've missed their chance. Experts say a quality-friendly equation must keep up the gains, at least 2 pounds per day or more, depending on frame size.

So if you really want to put the racer's edge on your herd, forget stockered yearlings. Instead of sending them to the feedyard at 12 months, send the calves and see them finished with money in the bank at 13 months. It's being done, and the winner's purse is hefty.

A few perks include better use of pasture resources, increased carcass value and quicker feedback on how your current program is working. Of course some of those only apply to cattlemen who partner or feed their own calves, but there are buyers who look for cattle that are on the fast track to success.

Those two producers drain their cups and wind up their chat.

"Sometimes I hear calves promoted as 'green,' or thin," one says, reaching for his coat. "I want efficiency, but I don't buy them because of the hidden costs."

His friend nods. "I'm not afraid to buy creep-fed calves. They know how to eat stay on track for an early finish."

Sounds like a winning plan – at the bank for delivering early cash flow and from the consumer for delivering better beef. Δ

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