



Priorities First

Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business
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Effective Cow Herd Health

Cow herd health is a combination of sound nutrition, a proactive health regimen and calculated management. According to the *Priorities First* survey, disease prevention (health maintenance) of replacement heifers and calves, both pre- and post-weaning, as well as cows and bulls were high ranking subcategories in the herd health section. A holistic approach is necessary and includes a herd health program with a trusted veterinarian that will benefit all segments of the beef industry.

Sound nutrition for each production phase of the female plays a vital role in the animal's ability to fight off disease, respond properly to vaccines and improve reproductive performance. Research shows keeping a cow's body adequately conditioned through proper nutrition and routinely evaluating her body condition score increases conception rate and improves calf vigor¹.

While weather is beyond commercial cow-calf producers' control, properly preparing equipment and calving facilities can improve calf health. Calves born in a dry, clean environment are less likely to develop scours (neo-natal calf diarrhea) and have respiratory problems. Calves are most susceptible to death at two phases in their lives: the first two weeks of life; and in the first 30 days after weaning.

The spreading of infectious agents is kept to a minimum by:

- Housing livestock in areas with ample room
- Keeping healthy livestock away from sick animals and contaminated areas
- Preventing the buildup of contaminated material (manure, mud) under cover such as in barns
- Preventing contamination of feed and water

Dystocia can also lead to increased risk of disease and poor performance of cattle. Research at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center (MARC) in Clay Center, NE, has shown calves that experience calving difficulties are four times more likely to be born dead or die within 24 hours of birth than those calves born without difficulty (16 vs. 4%)³. Dystocia can be reduced by considering birth weight and calving ease EPDs (expected progeny differences) during sire selection and ensuring proper nutrition of females. Producers may also consider calving heifers earlier than cow herdmates so they can be observed more frequently.

Priorities First: Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business, by Tom Field, Ph.D., Fort Collins, Colorado, and sponsored by the American Angus Association, is the first comprehensive effort to prioritize management and economic issues for cow-calf producers. (A detailed summary can be found at www.angus.org or contact the American Angus Association, 816.383.5100 to obtain a printed copy of *Priorities First*.)

ECONOMIC LOSSES DUE TO SCOURS

The effect of scours on weaning weight was studied by Montana researchers by reviewing 14 years of records on more than 3,600 calves². Researchers included per calf treatment, labor costs and reduction in weaning weights in the analysis.

- Total economic loss per scouring calf that survived to weaning was \$17.28 to \$59.96
- Average economic loss over the 14 years of the study was \$34.84 per scouring calf

BOVINE VIRAL DIARRHEA VIRUS

This common virus (BVDV) affects a majority of the nation's cow herds. In many herds, cattle may be infected with and be carriers of BVDV even though they exhibit no outward signs of sickness. These cattle are persistently infected (PI) and can infect herd mates through secretion of bodily fluids. PI animals are approximately 10 times more likely to become chronically ill and realized than non-PI animals and are approximately 10 times more likely to die than non-PI animals⁴. If an animal's immune system is compensated (during stressful periods), they are more susceptible to acquire the infection. Reducing commingling between herds, utilizing an effective vaccination program, testing and separating PI cows from the healthy herd, and knowing the health regimen of cows before introducing them into the core herd can all decrease the spread of BVDV.

A VACCINATION PROGRAM ALONE IS NOT A HERD HEALTH PROGRAM

Attacking a disease at multiple points, rather than a single control point with vaccinations can prove to be beneficial. Reading vaccination and medication directions and adhering to prescribed protocol of each will increase effectiveness. For specific vaccination recommendations, work with a trusted herd health veterinarian to create a program tailored to individual operations.

¹ *Body Condition Scoring Beef Cows* by Dan E. Eversole, *Extension Animal Scientist, Beef, VA Tech et al.*, posted December 2000, at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/beef/400-795/400-795.html>.

² *The Cow-Calf Manager* by John B. Hall, *Extension Animal Scientist, Beef, VA Tech, April 2004*, at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/news/periodicals/livestock> (Anderson et al. 2004).

³ *Minimizing Calving Difficulty in Beef Cattle*, by Pete Anderson, 2007.

⁴ *Profile of a PI*, *Bovine Veterinarian*, by Geni Wren, February 2006, pp 6-9. (From Guy Lonergan, BVSc, Phd, West Texas A&M University data).