

News column for use week of September 23, 2024
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Preparing and Marketing Calves

It's time to start thinking about our management and marketing strategies for this year's spring calf crop. Margins in the cattle industry and agriculture are often unfortunately narrow (even with projections of record-setting high calf prices). Therefore, maximizing calf revenue is important for cow/calf producers every year. Calf revenue is driven by 3 factors, 1.) the number of calves sold, 2.) sale weight of calves, and 3.) price received.

Cow/calf producers have some control over the number of calves sold and sale weight. The number of calves sold is essentially a function of stocking rate, cow fertility, and/or reproduction on an operation. The sale weight of calves is more complex but is a multi-factorial combination of genetics, calving distribution, calf age, nutrition, management, and technology use (implants). When preparing young calves for sale day, moving them in a hurry and not following health protocols can not only be stressful, but it can also result in lost income due to lower sale weights.

Price received is likely the most influential of the 3 factors that drive calf revenue and is the factor that cow/calf producers often believe they have the least ability to control. Once a set of calves enters the sale ring or appears on the video screen their value is determined by what two prospective buyers are willing to pay. Although it is impossible for producers to directly influence what buyers are willing to pay, sometimes it is not completely helpless. Cow/calf producers directly control what they will sell, weaned calves, value-added calves, or feeders. Some producers will follow a preconditioning protocol that involves weaning the calves and exposing them to a feed bunk and other water sources. The preconditioning diet should have about 30% forage, and then the morning you take them to the sale barn just hold them off of feed. Along with giving the calves time to adjust to a new diet, there is a benefit to exposing them to close contact with people and machinery. Calves that are used to seeing humans and farm equipment will make the transition to the feeding phase of production go smoother, allowing your calves to perform better and build your reputation of selling high-quality calves.

Producers can also determine when they sell their calves. Using different resources can help determine the right time to sell specific weight ranges. evaluate different market scenarios, from selling five-weight calves the first week of October, to seven weights later, helps producers make the best decision for their operations. Producers can also help the price of their calves by providing the auctioneer or sales representative with as much information as possible about the cattle they are selling only helps them do their job better, which is to get the best price for your cattle. Also, when you are taking the calves to an auction, let people know. Let your customers know when you are taking the calves to market through the community and social media channels.

If you have any questions, feel free to stop by or contact me in the Washington office, 785-325-2121 or khildebrand@ksu.edu.