



Priorities First

Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business
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Herd Health is High Priority in Cow-Calf Business

Herd Health ranked 3rd overall out of 15 management categories in the *Priorities First* survey, according to producer and specialist respondents.

The survey also concluded significant management emphasis should be dedicated to disease prevention within the herd. A proactive health maintenance program should be implemented for cows, bulls and especially, replacement heifers and calves (both pre-and post-weaning).

Effective health programs involve both prevention and treatment of disease problems affecting beef cattle. The old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” applies to herd health management. Preventative measures are typically more cost-effective to implement than attempting to deal with a disease outbreak.

The most successful herd health management programs involve cooperative planning by producers and their veterinarians. Veterinarians need to understand the management programs of individual beef cattle operations, especially the major factors affecting profitability. Producers should be aware of their limitations in evaluating, treating and caring for sick animals and of the proper timing for seeking a veterinarian’s assistance.

A sound herd health program is based on the following components:

- Sound nutritional regime
- Continuous training of personnel
- Known source of livestock
- Sound sanitation management and biosecurity practices
- Excellent record keeping system accompanied by a sound monitoring and evaluation system
- Functional, well-maintained facilities
- Excellent relationship with a professional herd veterinarian
- A sound preventative vaccination system

“Progressive beef producers have learned that disease prevention moves them a long way toward profitability. The cow-calf operations we work with aim to develop quality beef from a healthy herd. An active herd health program yields healthy calves, fewer train wrecks, and helps ensure the producer’s future in the business.”

—Dr. Arn Anderson, Veterinarian, Bowie, Texas
(Priorities First Participant)

Results from the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity proved postweaning calf disease can devastate producer profitability, accounting for as much as \$200 per head in lost revenue. While the most dramatic losses are realized as increased death loss and treatment costs, lingering reductions in feedlot gain and quality grade also jeopardize the bottom line.

Summary of Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity Data

- Healthy cattle returned \$201.16 per head more than cattle treated twice for disease.
- Increased death loss and treatment accounted for up to \$148.47 per head in lost revenue, while reductions in performance and carcass merit further reduced net return by an additional \$52.69 per head.
- 17.5% of all calves (2,334 head) were treated as a primary result of bovine respiratory disease (BRD).
- Sick cattle lost three to four times more dollars from inferior quality grade than were returned for lower yield grade.
- Mortality rate was 100 times higher for cattle treated twice compared to non-treated cattle.

Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity data represents 13,321 calves from 12 states fed at eight Iowa feedlots during 2002-04.

Priorities First respondents are not concerned about keeping health maintenance expenses below industry average.

An 11-year study conducted by Pfizer Animal Health to quantify premiums paid for calves in Superior Livestock’s Value-Added Health Programs (VAHP) concluded that a strong correlation exists between the level of participation in VAHPs and the price received for calves sold.

The premium paid for WeanVAC[®]-like calves (VAC45) averaged \$4.58/cwt during the 11-year period, ranging from \$2.47/cwt in 1995 to \$6.64/cwt in 2005. The price advantage of WeanVAC-like calves more than doubled from 2000 to 2004. The premium paid for PreVAC-like calves (VAC 34) averaged \$1.96/cwt and ranged from \$1.35/cwt in 1995 to \$2.45/cwt in 2005.¹

¹ Pfizer Animal Health TECH NOTES, *Eleven-Year Study Confirms Buyers Pay More for Preconditioned Calves*, King, ME, Final Report 2005.

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*.)