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Will Premiums Pay for Preconditioning Calves With Feed After Weaning?

By Dr. Findlay Pate
UF-IFAS, Range Cattle REC



For questions or comments regarding this publication contact
[Dr. Findlay Pate](#)

We have conducted many trials on the preconditioning calves with feed after weaning (preweaning). In three trials with Lykes Brothers Ranch in the 1970's, steer calves were fed 25 days after weaning in covered, dirt pens at Wild Island. Pay weights (liveweight less 3%) at weaning and out of the preconditioning pens showed that calves gained 25 pounds. Each calf ate 205 pounds of a preconditioning feed with free access to hay. Death loss in Florida was 1%. Calves preconditioned with feed in Florida subsequently gained faster and had less sickness and deaths when finished in a Texas feedlot than similar calves shipped direct to the feedlot at weaning.

In two trials in 1986 steer calves were fed a commercial preconditioning feed 21 days after weaning. In trial 1, calves shipped from Belle Glade were fed in covered, concrete pens at Ona. In trial 2, calves raised at Ona were fed in open, dirt pens. In both trials, pay weight gains were 30 pounds per steer or 1.4 pounds per day. It required 273 pounds of preconditioning feed per calf.

In the 1990's Dr. Bill Brown conducted six trials at Ona with heifer calves fed 30 days after weaning in open, dirt pens. Feed treatments included soybean hulls, soybean hulls + cottonseed meal, and a commercial weaning feed. Pay weight gain was 27 pounds per heifer with no difference among the three types of feed. Preconditioning required 275 pounds of feed per heifer.

In summary, calves preconditioned with feed four weeks after weaning in Florida gained 30 to 40 pounds of pay weight. Summing feed, equipment, vaccines, medications, facilities, and death losses, it cost \$30 to \$35 to precondition a calf four weeks after

weaning. With the current market of \$100 per cwt for 500 pound calves and 1.25 pounds per day gain, one would more or less breakeven on a similar feeding program.

Will buyers pay a premium for calves preconditioned with feed after weaning to provide a profit incentive? Dr. Michael King at Colorado State University analyzed four years of sales data accumulated by Superior Livestock Video Auctions throughout the U. S. (King, et al., 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, CSU Beef Program Reports). The study involved a huge amount of data with 6,800 lots and 832,000 calves. Calves averaged 537 pounds when sold at a mean price of \$67.21 and \$74.16 per cwt for heifers and steers, respectively.

Dr. King compared sale prices of calves receiving all vaccinations and sold at weaning with that of calves similarly vaccinated but fed 45 days after weaning (Vac-45). Calves fed 45 days after weaning bought a \$1.94 per cwt premium. With current calf prices and a similar or slightly better premium it is marginally profitable to precondition calves with feed for four weeks after weaning in Florida. With lower calf prices the profitability of preconditioning calves with feed is less certain.

Even if preconditioning is not profitable on a pay weight plus a premium basis, it may be cost effective to feed retained-ownership calves after weaning because of production advantages obtained later in the feedlot.

If calves are preconditioned with feed in south Florida, be certain that they are fed in a high, dry area. Heavy rains in July thru September can result in standing water, muddy conditions, low feed intake, poor gains, sickness and death losses. An alternative is to contract feeding calves with a commercial backgrounding operation 45 or more days. Another alternative is to background calves 45 or more days on good quality, well-drained pasture and a limited amount of dry concentrate. It is preferable to wean and feed calves on pasture during early fall after the rainy season.

It is important to get calves on dry concentrate feed and good quality forage immediately after weaning whether shipped or retained. Calves retained on the ranch, including replacement heifers, should be fed dry concentrate feed three to four weeks after weaning to maintain health. When feeding is discontinued calves should have access to good quality pasture.