Managing Shrink of Marketed Calves

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Body weight loss or shrink is a normal occurrence of calves once removed from the cow, feed, or even their accustomed surroundings. Calves will shrink about 3% during the first 4 to 5 hours following removal from the cow or feed. Three percent shrink has become the cattle industry standard as a basis for establishing sale weight of newly weaned calves.

If calves are gathered and immediately weighed for sale their live weight is shrunk (reduced) by 3% to establish a sale weight. In the trade this is termed pencil shrink. The 3% pencil shrink approximates live weight loss by calves sold through an auction market.

Shrink is a phenomenon the seller must be aware of because it influences the value of a calf. A 500 pound steer calf on today's market sells for $4 to $5 less for every 1% increase in shrink. A truck load of calves will bring $400 to $500 less for each 1% increase in shrink.

An example of how rapidly shrink occurs, we penned a group of crossbred steers at weaning for 6 hours without feed or water. These calves averaged 501 pounds when removed from the cow and shrunk 4.5% to an average weight of 478 pounds six hours later.

To estimate auction market shrink, Extension workers in North Carolina compared calf arrival weights at the auction market with calf weights when sold. They found a shrink of 2%; and this did not include weight losses prior to the calf's arrival at the auction market.

North Dakota researchers used steer and heifer calves that were on a preconditioning/backgrounding program to study marketing shrink. Calves transported from the farm to the auction market and placed on hay and water the day before the sale lost 6.2% of their on farm weight by the time they were sold, while calves hauled to the auction market the day of the sale and sold within 2 hours after arrival lost only 2.4% of their on farm weight when sold.

The important principle to remember is that shrink is closely related to the time a calf has been removed from the cow or feed. Calves sold at the ranch should be gathered as easy as possible, weighed immediately, and adjusted to an agreed upon pencil shrink.
If ranch marketed calves are loaded on the truck and hauled a distance for weighing the pencil shrink should be adjusted accordingly. If calves are weighed on the truck, insist that trucks arrive on time such that calves do not remain penned for extended periods.

For calves sold at an auction market the seller should gather calves with limited commotion then haul them immediately to the auction market. Try to deliver calves such that they are sold as quickly as possible after arrival.

It is recognized that many ranchers with small herds must pen their calves the day before the sale. Some ranchers even deliver calves to the auction market the day before the sale. It is important that these calves be provided hay and water, but they will still lose considerable weight.

Again, obtain a sale weight on calves in as short of time as possible after removal from the cow or feed. This is true for calves sold at the ranch or the auction market. Remember, the buyer is well aware of shrink and also uses it to their advantage.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate