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## **Preconditioning Calves with Feed on the Ranch**

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With the current downtrend in the feeder calf market, some ranchers may retain ownership of their calves through a grazing and/or feedlot finishing phase. With retained-ownership, a feed management program to get calves over the stress of weaning becomes important. Calves can be moved at weaning to a backgrounding yard, pasture grazing area, or feed yard experienced in handling and feeding newly weaned calves. Another option is to feed weaned calves for three or four weeks (short-term preconditioning) on the ranch in Florida. The University of Florida has conducted several trials on preconditioning calves under ranch conditions.

In the 1970's, a three-year study was conducted in cooperation with Lykes Brothers Ranch. Steer calves (100 per year) were preconditioned for 25 days after weaning in covered, dirt-floored pens at Wild Island. Pay weights taken at the start (calf weight off cow, less three percent) and end (live weight out of lot, less three percent) of preconditioning showed that calves gained 25 pounds of pay weight (one pound/day). Each calf ate 205 pounds of a high concentrate preconditioning feed, plus hay. Preconditioned calves gained faster and had less sickness and deaths when finished in the feedlot than calves shipped at weaning, but advantages were not large enough to offset preconditioning costs.

In 1986, two trials were conducted at Ona in which steer calves were fed a commercial preconditioning feed for 21 days after weaning. In one trial, calves shipped from Belle Glade were fed in covered, concrete-floored pens. In the second trial, calves raised at Ona were fed in open, dirt-floored pens. In both trials, pay weight gains were 30 pounds/steer (1.4 pounds/ day). It required 273 pounds of preconditioned feed per calf.

In the early 1990's, six trials were conducted at Ona with heifer calves fed 30 days after weaning in open, dirt-floored pens. Feed treatments included soybean hulls, soybean hulls plus cottonseed meal, and a commercial weaning feed. Pay weight gain was 27 pounds/heifer and was similar for heifers fed all three types of feed. Preconditioning required 275 pounds of feed per heifer.

In summary, these trials indicated that calves fed in Florida for three to four weeks after weaning will gain 30, possibly 40, pounds of pay weight. Feed (bagged) alone will cost \$20 to \$25 per calf. With labor, equipment, and facility cost included, this is a costly practice relative to the pay weight gain obtained, especially when calves are selling for less than \$70/ cwt.

Feeder calf buyers will often not pay enough premium for preconditioned calves to overcome feeding costs. However, preconditioning may be advantageous with retained-ownership calves if unsure about subsequent management practices for handling and feeding newly weaned calves.

During a tour of pasture and feedlot operations in Oklahoma and Texas this past spring, we talked to many feeders who have handled and fed thousands of Florida calves. A consistent message was that Florida calves shipped directly from the ranch at weaning performed well, with very minor sickness problems. They stated that nutrition during the weaning process is a major factor in getting calves to perform well, and in preventing sickness and death losses. That is, get calves off cows, load and ship them to their destination, and get them eating dry feed as rapidly as possible.

A word of caution to producers considering preconditioning calves in Florida: be certain that calves can be held and fed in a high, dry area. Heavy rainfall is common in South Florida when many ranchers wean calves in July, August, and September. Daily rain, standing water, and muddy conditions can substantially reduce feed intake, which will reduce gain and increase sickness.

We recommend that all calves retained on the ranch, including replacement heifers, be fed a good quality, dry concentrate feed for three weeks after weaning to maintain good, healthy calves.