

## **Is the juice worth the squeeze?**

### ***Make weaning and preconditioning a worthwhile investment***

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Time and time again, the data tells us that properly weaned and preconditioned calves are more valuable than calves that were “weaned on diesel fuel.” And it is beyond the shadow of a doubt that weaning and preconditioning is the right thing for our industry. So why don’t more of us employ weaning and preconditioning as a routine management practice? In short, it doesn’t always yield a positive return on investment. This doesn’t mean that it can’t, and it doesn’t mean that it won’t. It just means that if we aren’t focusing on adding additional value to the cattle above and beyond just being able to call them weaned and preconditioned, it may not seem like the juice is worth the squeeze.

We know that the fact that calves are no longer balling adds value. We know that castration and dehorning add value. We know that any of a number of defined vaccination and deworming programs add value. We know that bunk-breaking and familiarity with a waterer adds value. And we know that marketing calves in a way that puts them in front of customers that recognize the benefit of these things adds value. So if this is the case, why are the returns often too small to entice more adoption?

Simply put, pounds still pay. And unfortunately, a 4 – 5 % “value-added” premium for weaned and preconditioned calves may not offer enough “juice” for many to justify “the squeeze.” Even if it is the right thing for the industry, my experience has been that a month and a half of time and effort that pays for itself without any additional return is a hard sell. So considering that it is the right thing to do for the industry, how do we add enough additional value during that period to yield enough of a return to make it worth our while and then some? Nutritional management and time.

Expect 500 to 600 lb calves to lose roughly 50 lbs at weaning. Even when a portion of that is gut fill, if those calves are managed to gain only 1 to 1.5 lbs per head per day during a 45-day preconditioning phase, we essentially get them back to where they started at weaning time – and that’s about it. In that scenario, the additional value that was added to the cattle through being able to label them as weaned and preconditioned is often offset by the expenses that it took to get them there. If managing calves for a rate growth that will add additional value through weight gain is not a primary focus of your program, don’t expect weaning and preconditioning to be a game-changer on your sale ticket.

But, those same calves are managed to gain 2 to 2.5 lbs per head per day during that same 45-day weaning and preconditioning phase (and it isn’t incredibly difficult or expensive to do so), that’s an additional 40 to 60 lbs of added weight. So now we have not only the additional weight, but also the premium associated with the fact that we can call them weaned and preconditioned.

Most programs require a minimum weaning and preconditioning phase of somewhere in the realm of 45 days. Unfortunately, it seems like many groups of calves are managed as if they couldn't get to the end of that 45 day period and cattle shipped soon enough. But unless those calves were creep fed, expect their gain to be back-loaded. Extending that time frame – even by two weeks – can pay huge dividends.

Extending the phase from 45 to 60 days, and managing the cattle on that same plane of nutrition often adds somewhere in the realm of an additional 120 lbs of weight gain during that 60-day period of time. And we can expect that additional weight gain and value-added premium to add \$150.00 to \$200.00 in value per head. If we focus on utilizing high quality forages (pasture or harvested), an economical source of supplemental energy and protein, and a complementary mineral and vitamin supplement to do so, that will generally result in a \$30.00 to \$50.00 per head return over investment.

Do you know of any banks offering more than a 10 to 20 % interest rate over a 60-day investment period? I don't either. But if done properly, weaning and preconditioning can. And if necessary, work with your nutritionist or Extension personnel to ensure that your investment in weaning and preconditioning adds value to your calves in a way that widens your profit margins, rather than just becoming an added expense.