

ONE PHASE AT A TIME: HEALTHY CALVES MEAN PROFITABLE FEEDLOTS

Feedlot performance doesn't start when the calves hit the bunk. It starts at birth, and every step along the way either protects or undermines the animal's potential. Whether you're raising beef-on-dairy or conventional beef cattle, the health and resilience of calves are built long before they step off the truck at a feedlot.

Today's tight margins demand intention at every phase of production.

PHASE ONE: Getting calves off to a strong start

Strong calves don't happen by accident. Their health trajectory begins with the basics of clean environments, good nutrition and passive immunity. Calves raised in environments that prioritize good hygiene, disease prevention and consistent nutrition show up stronger and more resilient.

These practices are critical for beef-on-dairy calves. Once viewed as by-products, these animals are now recognized as feeder cattle with real genetic potential and economic return. But they must be treated accordingly. Proper calf care sets the stage for everything that follows.

More calf raisers and dairies are rising to the challenge – recognizing their calf management practices impact more than their bottom lines; they affect the entire beef supply chain. And for the feedlot, those early gains mean a higher chance of success from day one.

PHASE TWO: Setting the tone at feedlot arrival

Transportation stress is inevitable, but how we manage the transition can make all the difference.

At arrival, minimizing stress is priority one. Follow a simple principle: For every hour calves spend on the truck, they get one hour of rest before processing. That downtime helps reset their immune systems and energy levels.

When it's time to process, protocols should include a comprehensive health plan of vaccinations, deworming and other preventatives aligned with veterinary guidance. But facilities and people matter just as much as products. Calm handling through alleys and chutes helps reduce stress and sets the tone for the calf's entire time on feed.

After processing, calves move to their new pens, where fresh water, clean feed and dry bedding support continued recovery and help calves find a rhythm in their new environment.

PHASE THREE: Proactive health, not just reactive

Once calves are on feed, begin proactive health management with observation. Spotting early signs of respiratory disease – like droopy ears, nasal discharge and coughing – can often signal the onset of a more serious problem.

This approach is especially essential for beef-on-dairy calves, who are often more vulnerable to conditions like mycoplasma infections and other respiratory challenges. Establishing clear criteria for intervention, maintaining meticulous health records and adhering to standard treatment protocols means that every calf is given an equal chance to recover quickly. Early detection not only prevents disease escalation and spread to other calves but also minimizes disruptions in growth and feed efficiency.

PHASE FOUR: Managing the gut, not just the lungs and liver

Respiratory conditions and liver abscesses are major concerns, but don't over look digestive health. Calves – especially those from beef-on-dairy backgrounds – can be particularly susceptible to nutritional stress and digestive disorders such as acidosis, bloat and scours. This sensitivity can be attributed to their smaller size at arrival and transition to bunk-fed grain diets.

Successful management in this phase involves ensuring ample bunk space, gradual ration changes and the inclusion of roughage to ease digestion. Even the most well-formulated ration can fall short if the animal is not physiologically prepared to digest it effectively. By meticulously managing digestive health, feedlot operators can secure more consistent average daily gains and overall better feed conversion rates.

PHASE FIVE: Connecting calves to their health histories

A comprehensive understanding of each calf's early life and care history is a powerful tool in the feedlot. When dairies and calf raisers share detailed health records – covering colostrum intake, previous vaccinations and any treatments administered – feedlot managers can more accurately tailor their health protocols.

Disease happens for two reasons: exposure and suppressed immunity. Calves that weren't raised right will struggle no matter how well we manage the feedlot. With detailed background information, feedlots can proactively manage risks related to exposure and immune suppression, resulting in better performance and fewer setbacks at the rail.

The bigger picture: A system, not a silo

The good news? We're starting to see raisers and feeders work more closely together. Calf raisers and dairies are investing in better calf management practices because they know the end value is worth it. And feeders are adapting to manage the requirements of beef-on-dairy cattle more effectively.

The result? Lower treatment rates, higher feed efficiency and better carcass quality. That's the power of systems thinking. No single tool or product can create success. But every small improvement – from birth to bunk to beef – adds up to healthier cattle, stronger profits and a durable supply chain.



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Dr. Dan Thomson is a third-generation veterinarian and managing partner at Production Animal Consultation, serving feedlot clients across the Midwest. He advises major beef supply chains, including McDonald's, Tyson, Cargill and JBS, and chairs the NCBA Animal Welfare Committee. With over 100 peer-reviewed publications and \$36.3 million in grants, he's a global speaker on cattle health. He also hosts Doc Talk on RFD-TV, a nationally aired show on bovine medicine now in its 15th season.