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Processing Calves at Turnout

True spring calving is in full swing, the grass is greening up where moisture allows and with this new growth of grass, calf processing and/or branding is just around the corner. While brand inspection is not mandatory in Kansas, many ranches utilize brands and spring processing prior to turnout on pasture is often referred to as “branding time”. Moving into this branding time, it is a good time to discuss some calf processing best management practices.

Evaluation of current health status, review of historical health issues and discussing processing vaccination protocols are best discussed with your veterinarian through a valid Veterinary Client Patient Relationship (VCPR). The purpose of the VCPR is for a vet to know the cattle, and the situation, and health/disease challenges. This discussion should be ongoing and addressed well in advance of the busy branding day.

Calf processing can hold a romantic reminiscing of cowboy traditions of family, community and industry in general. This time typically involves extra labor requirements, sometimes bringing in labor less familiar with proper animal health and handling protocols. Clear communication and instruction before the process begins is a must! Even if the cowboy crew is experienced, expectations vary operation to operation. Not having a communicated plan is planning to fail!

An area of focus should be the expectation of low-stress cattle handling. Visit with your help to refresh them on basic cattle handling do’s and don’ts of your operation. Sharing expectations of cattle gathering, sorting, and the steps to follow at processing is a good way to ensure everyone is on the same page. Depending on branding methods, discussing the expected branding techniques can improve the efficiency of the day.

Mishandling of animal health products, especially vaccines, can be counterproductive to health goals and is costly as well. Best management practices to ensure vaccines work include:

- When products require mixing, only mix as needed and not more than one hour prior to administration. Efficacy of the product declines outside of this hour window.
- When mixing vaccines, do not over shake. Simply swirling the vaccine in the bottle is enough to ensure a good mix.
- Store vaccine according to the temperature range on the manufacturer label and do not allow them to be exposed to sunlight. Icepacks and coolers are your friend in the field.
- Label syringes and do not allow them to get mixed up with different products. Keep modified live vaccines into a syringe and killed vaccines in another.
- Change your needles every time a syringe is refilled to ensure contamination of the remaining product doesn’t happen due to a dirty needle. Replacing needles every ten to fifteen head is suggested.
- Give all injections in the “injection triangle” front of the shoulder in the neck region unless the label specifically advises to administer in a different location.
- Utilize subcutaneous injections when product label allows, to reduce tissue damage.

Research has shown that the stress related to processing and branding for calves was correlated more with the amount of time separated from the dam than the actual processing method. The more efficiently calves return back to their dams, the less stress those calves will experience. Try to work group sizes in relation to the available work time, allowing for minimal separation time. Effective communication between everyone involved will lead to reduced stress for all. Good luck with calf processing, keep praying for rain, green grass and full ponds!