

Handling high risk cattle: Develop a sound receiving strategy

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As we enter the beginning of fall, and temperatures begin to cool, many producers are looking toward preparing for winter grazing and receiving stocker calves. One thing that is very important is to have a plan in place for receiving new loads of cattle. A goal of any receiving plan should be to minimize stress on newly received calves. These newly received calves are often considered high risk due to previous handling and management. These high risk calves are typically light weight, newly weaned, comingled, hauled, and exposed to new diseases and feedstuffs. All of these elements combine to create a stressful situation for the calf. Although specifics of the plan may vary depending on the needs of a particular set of calves, it is important that every receiving plan contain several parts. Many of these pieces occur before cattle begin arriving. A good receiving plan should cover: facilities, health, and nutrition.

Receiving facilities include loading facilities and holding pens as well as traditional working facilities. Planning receiving facilities is the first step in developing a receiving strategy. All facilities should be complete and working before cattle arrive. A well-designed facility should allow for smooth flow of cattle with minimal stress on both the cattle and the handler. A good strategy for designing the facility is to simply follow the path of the cattle.

Loading ramps are a good first step in designing a facility. Design of the ramp itself as well as placement of the ramp should be taken into account. Some questions to consider: Will cattle be brought in in tractor trailer loads or stock trailers, how many calves are expected to be unloaded at a time, and if it rains can the trailer still back up to the facility to unload the cattle. Ramps should be designed with both trailer and cattle in mind. Ramp height will vary based on the trailer cattle are delivered on. For example, a ramp for a standard stock trailer only needs to be 15 inches high, while a ramp accommodating a double-decker trailer should be 100 inches high. The rise of the ramp should be 3.5 inches per foot. Footing in the ramp is also of concern. Smooth concrete may allow cattle to slip, and cause injuries. Portable or adjustable ramps are also an option, but it is important to be sure that they are properly secured.

As cattle are unloaded, they will likely travel directly to sorting pens for further processing. Facility design can vary widely from one operation to the next, but should always include several key areas that may be adjusted based on needs. Sorting or holding pens should be large enough to accommodate the expected number of cattle without overcrowding, and should provide cattle a source of fresh water, a feed source if cattle are to be held for an extended period, and shade. Some type of alley to move cattle from holding pens to the working facility is also necessary, and should be approximately 10 to 12 feet wide. A wider alley will allow cattle room to go around the handler, but a narrow alley may cause problems as well. This alley should funnel into a crowding area or tub, and funnel down into a working alley that leads to the chute. This working alley should be long enough to avoid delays in processing cattle, and should be wide enough to move cattle forward without resistance without allowing space to turn around. The working chute should be considered next. There are many options available, but the most important consideration is a way to effectively restrain cattle to give injections in the neck without harming the calf or handler.

Health programs are often the first consideration when designing a receiving plan. Specifics of a health program should be tailored to both an operation and cattle's needs. It is important to work closely with a local veterinarian familiar with the operation, and type of cattle. Following Beef Quality Assurance guidelines should also be an integral part of a health program. Unless cattle have been hauled long distances, it is often a good idea to process cattle immediately after arrival. However, processing may need to be delayed due to extreme heat or weather conditions. Although, each health plan will differ in regards to specifics, several management practices should generally be performed. Cattle should be dewormed, vaccinated for Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Parainfluenza-3 (PI-3), Bovine Respiratory Syncytial Virus (BRSV), and Blackleg (7-way Clostridial), tested for persistently infected BVD, given an ear tag with a unique animal ID, castrated, dehorned, and implanted with growth-promoting compounds if desired. Additional treatments and vaccinations may be needed based on veterinary advice.

The receiving phase offers unique nutritional challenges as compared to other phases of a calf's life. Proper nutritional management during this phase is critical to ensuring success and profitability. As discussed previously, these calves are often stressed upon arrival, and will likely have low feed and water intake for several days after arrival. Some calves may even be naïve to feed, hay, or even water troughs, and calves should be carefully observed during this time. Due to their often low feed intake, receiving diets should be formulated to be highly palatable, stimulate intake, and provide a more concentrated source of key nutrients. In general, most newly received calves are not accustomed to high concentrate diets, and therefore diets should be formulated to contain no more than 55% concentrate to minimize nutritional disorders. Diets should be formulated to account for size and weight of calves, and take into account the anticipated low feed consumption.

One last and often overlooked consideration for a receiving plan is personnel. It is important to have well trained and sufficient personnel to receive and process cattle. One key element that is essential is that workers are trained to handle cattle. These newly received calves are already experiencing stress from the above mentioned areas, and it important that handling does not add to this stress. Low-stress cattle handling is a technique that uses the animal's natural tendencies. This means understanding the animal's flight zone and point of balance, and taking advantage of these natural behaviors to move cattle quietly and calmly. Handlers should be calm and patient with the cattle. This means no yelling and running calves from one place to another. Another area personnel should be trained in is Beef Quality Assurance, if vaccines and medications are not handled and given properly, this will have a big impact on the health of the cattle, and in the end profitability of the operation.

Although developing a receiving plan may seem like a hassle, it is a critical part of the process of handling stocker calves. If a plan is developed and put into place before the cattle arrive, it should minimize many of the issues that may pop up if cattle arrive with no plan in place. Planning ahead and adjusting the plan to meet the specific needs of each group of cattle is an essential part of ensuring the success and profitability of a stocker operation.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.