Historically speaking, cow/calf producers were “price takers” rather than “price makers.” However, in the past decade or so, over a dozen new opportunities are enabling some calves deemed higher “quality” to sell at a higher price. Some of these options are the result of increased consumer demand for higher quality and more consistent products (or ones they know more about), while others were driven by feedyards trying to improve the efficiency and profitability of their businesses.

Obviously, several very simple ways to improve the marketability of calves by adding value have been around for decades. Most of these are management-related, including selling steer calves that are:

- Dehorned or polled
- Castrated at a young age
- Uniform in age, color and type
- Muscular
- Healthy

Verification Options for Adding Value

If you can find the right market to sell your cattle into – which should be accomplished before any of these options are initiated – substantial premiums are available. Many of these options include participation in “verification” programs, where a third-party documents something a producer does or has, including management practices or genetics. A few readily-available “formal” programs include:

1. **Age and source verified** – Recording birth dates of the first and last calves born during a calving season and verifying them via a third party makes them eligible for export to Japan if harvested at 20 months or younger. Premiums of $1 to $3+ per cwt for a weaned calf are available ($5 to $15 per head).

2. **Natural verified** – Third-party documentation stating that no antibiotics or growth promotants were administered can result in a $1.50 to $2.00+ per cwt premium ($8 to $11 per head).

If you can find the right market to sell your cattle into, substantial premiums are available.
3. **Organic verified** – Third-party documentation that organic rules have been followed (“natural” plus use of organic feeds, no pesticides/herbicides, etc.).

4. **Breed-based branded programs** – Cattle that fit live animal specifications (either hide color or documentation of genetic background) enables producers to supply numerous product lines (e.g., Certified Angus Beef). Hide color premiums of $1 to $5+ per cwt have been documented in calves.

5. **Preconditioning programs** – Several private- and state-sponsored programs enable the documentation of vaccinations given and possible premiums of $1 to $6+ per cwt.

### Information Options for Adding Value

Beyond using “formal,” and sometimes fee-based, programs involving a third-party to verify calf crop traits (as described above), there are many “informal” opportunities to add value to calves. This primarily involves the transfer of information, including background and historical information on calves.

Certain pieces of information related to probable calf performance (growth, health and/or carcass) are of great value to feedyards since the odds that calves will perform better than average are recognized at the time of purchase. Ultimately, this information can help increase the chances that a feeder will make a profit on your calves and ideally will get the feeder to pay more for them upfront. Some options include:

1. **Historical performance data** – Information about feedyard gain, feed efficiency, sickness rate and carcass performance of previous years’ calves can yield substantial premiums.

2. **BVD PI tested** – Calf crops tested for the absence of any calves persistently infected (PI) with Bovine Viral Diarrhea (BVD) can help reduce losses due to sickness or death.

3. **Weaned** – Calves weaned for 30 or 45 days and trained to feed bunks and waterers are very desirable to feedyards since health problems will likely be decreased and feed intake will be strong at arrival. Premiums of $2 to $5+ per cwt are available.

### Be Creative With Your Marketing

Few of the programs or options listed above will generate a premium, unless your calves are offered for sale to buyers willing to pay premiums for having these beneficial traits. Furthermore, it is important to sell a product that is in high demand in the marketplace.

Today, beyond the traits listed above (of which some are actually niche markets), the underlying marketplace wants a few key traits that can be easily accomplished:

1. **Heavy calves** – Due to increased cost-of-gain in the feedyard, the market wants calves ready for the feedyard to be heavier than in the past. Cow/calf producers should consider modifying their operations so they can wean and grow their calves on high-forage diets prior to selling them to a feedyard.

2. **Contracted calves** – During almost every summer for the past 5 years, prices for calves to be delivered in the fall have been much higher if they were offered for sale during the summer (e.g., August) vs. fall (e.g., October/November). Due to severe volatility in several commodity markets (grains, fuel, beef, etc.), feedyards want to “lock-in” calf prices in advance of receiving them. This is a great opportunity to get upwards of $10 per cwt more for your calves (approximately $50 per head) by selling them during the summer on a video sale.

### Truckload lots

Nearly everyone involved in the U.S. beef industry (particularly feedyards, buyers, truckers, etc.) would rather deal with truckload lots (50,000-60,000 lbs of cattle) instead of small groups. Premiums of $2 to $10 per cwt can be acquired if several small calf crops from similar genetic and management backgrounds can be combined and sold together, possibly even via video or private treaty.

Several straightforward options exist to add value, including selling dehorned, castrated, uniform and healthy calves. In addition to these strategies, producers should consider verifying specific aspects of their calf crop to acquire additional premiums, including age/source, natural/organic, breed and vaccination history. But, buyers and exact premiums should be identified before effort is made to initiate these verifications.

Plan to visit with your local county extension agent soon about how you can plan to add value to your 2010 calf crop.
Control Pinkeye Before It Affects Summer Gains

JEREMY POWELL, DVM

Pinkeye is a common problem plaguing cattle during the summer months. It can affect cattle of all ages, but younger cattle tend to exhibit a higher incidence of disease. Cattle suffering from the disease have noticeable economic losses associated with decreased weight gains, treatment expense, lower market prices and poor performance. Estimates of total production losses may vary from year to year, but some estimate the beef industry loses as much as $150 million annually to this disease. One scientific study conducted in Kentucky reported 205-day weaning weights were lowered by 36 lbs in bull calves and 40 lbs in heifer calves that had experienced an episode of pinkeye prior to weaning. The same study also reported that after weaning, male calves that had experienced disease before weaning continued to be affected, and they exhibited lower average daily gain and lower 365-day weight compared to calves that had not experienced disease.

Pinkeye is the common name for a bacterial disease caused by Moraxella bovis. Multiple strains of M. bovis exist, and each strain may be capable of leading to infection. Several factors can contribute to predisposing cattle to pinkeye. These factors include UV light, face flies, tall forage, a dusty environment and plant seed heads. Any of these factors can increase the likelihood of disease onset due to their ability to cause irritation or injury to the eye. Even though all breeds of cattle are susceptible to pinkeye, cattle lacking pigmentation around the eye have an increased prevalence of this disease. Unpigmented eyelids and white hair on the face does not absorb UV light, which may increase the irritation from sunlight.

The most important method of transmission for pinkeye is the face fly. Increased eye irritation often leads to increased lacrimation (tears), which attracts face flies. Unlike horn flies, face flies spend very little time on the animal. Therefore, face flies move from animal to animal spreading the bacteria. Pinkeye bacteria may remain viable for up to three days on the fly’s mouthparts once they are picked up from an infected animal.

Cattle affected by pinkeye may exhibit a variety of clinical signs depending on the severity of the disease. Initial symptoms associated with pinkeye include swelling, increased tear flow and squinting. A small ulcer (white spot) may also be evident in the center of the cornea. Progressive signs of the disease include redness along the eyelids, conjunctivitis (inflammation of the lining of the eye), decreased productivity and an increased cloudiness of the eye. In severe cases, the corneal ulcer that develops may rupture. This could lead to a stalk-like projection in the center of the eye or a protruding eyeball. If this occurs, permanent blindness is usually inevitable, so early recognition of pinkeye and early treatment is most rewarding.

Treatment typically targets the offending bacteria and also provides protection to the affected eye from further irritation. Long-acting oxytetracycline is typically effective against M. bovis. It can be injected subcutaneously (under the skin of the neck) at labeled dosages (4.5cc/100 lbs of body weight). Penicillin can also be administered into the affected eye by injecting it under the outer lining of the eye. Multiple treatments of antibiotics may be required and could be repeated every 3 days. Occasionally, antibiotic resistance can occur. In such cases, consult your veterinarian to conduct antibiotic sensitivity testing and provide recommendations about antibiotic treatment choices.

Providing protection to the affected eye may improve treatment results. The use of an eye patch can eliminate repeated irritation by flies, dust, plant seeds and sunlight. Another alternative would be to have your veterinarian suture the lids shut to protect the eye from further irritating factors.

Keys to Prevention

Prevention of pinkeye should focus on controlling the predisposing factors for the disease (flies, tall grass, etc.).

Fly control – Since face flies play such an important role in transmission of the disease, attempts should be made to control fly populations. Many insecticides are available for controlling flies with multiple administration options, such as ear tags, dust bags, sprays or pour-ons.
Vaccinations – Vaccines are available for use in preventing pinkeye. Vaccine should be administered a few weeks ahead of fly season in order to have high antibody levels before disease exposure occurs. Some vaccines may require a booster dose to be effective. Vaccination will help limit the number of cases in a herd and severity of disease, but may not completely eliminate this disease from occurring. Consult your veterinarian to determine which vaccine works best for your area.

Pasture management – Mowing tall grass in the pasture will help decrease the opportunity for cattle to suffer from abrasive irritation and reduce the potential to get grass or weed seeds in their eyes, thereby reducing the likelihood for development of disease. Shade should be available for animals during the summer months. Bright sunlight will only exacerbate problems with pinkeye.

Controlling pinkeye can definitely benefit your herd’s health and overall performance, which will add to your operation’s economic efficiency. For more information about pinkeye, consult your veterinarian or contact your county extension office.

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**2010 Beef Improvement Federation Meeting**

Plan to attend the 2010 Beef Improvement Federation Research Symposium and Annual Meeting June 28 - July 1, 2010, at the Holiday Inn Select Executive Conference Center in Columbia, Missouri.

Discover how the latest in beef genetics and production provide a unique gateway to profitability at the 2010 *Gateway to Profit*, hosted by the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF). This annual conference is an international gathering of progressive commercial and seedstock beef cattle producers, veterinarians, academics and allied industry persons who want to hear, share, learn and apply the science of genetics to beef production.

International and U.S. industry leaders, representatives and innovators will showcase and discuss leading-edge genetic advancements, while offering attendees practical solutions to adapt these technologies into any operation. Tours of local cattle operations, educational destinations and social events also provide additional opportunities for learning and networking.

For program agenda and registration, visit the conference website: [http://muconf.missouri.edu/bif/index.html](http://muconf.missouri.edu/bif/index.html)

The 2010 Beef Improvement Federation Conference is your *Gateway to Profit*. Be sure to join in!