News Release

Brad Tipton
Extension Educator, Ag/4-H Youth Development & C.E.D
Canadian County OSU Extension Office
Phone 262-0155, Fax 262-2267
E-mail: brad.tipton@okstate.edu

6/9/08

Buying Cutter Bulls vs. Steers

Oklahoma State University nutritionists and veterinarians took a close look at the performance differences while receiving bull calves versus steer calves during a 44 day backgrounding period. A total of 111 bulls and 204 steers were purchased from different auctions and received at the Willard Sparks Beef Cattle Research Center for the experiment.

Animals were processed after a 24-hour period and bull calves were surgically castrated. Cattle health was assessed every morning and animals that met a 'sick' pull criterion were taken to the processing facility where their rectal temperature was recorded. Animals that met the treatment criteria were treated and returned to their home pens.

During the length of the trial, animals that arrived as bulls had a higher sickness and death rate than those that arrived as steers (42.3 vs. 11.3% and 23.4 vs. 3.9%, respectively). Medicine cost per cutter bull over the steers was also higher ($12.30 vs. $2.65/animal). Although the animals that arrived as bulls were heavier (548 lb for bulls vs. 524 lb for steers), at the end of the trial; no difference was detected in body weight (675 lb for bulls vs. 682 lb for steers) at the end of the backgrounding period.

Average daily gain during the length of the trial was greater for steers compared with animals that arrived as bulls (3.63 lb/day for steers vs. 2.97 lb/day for bulls). In this trial the scientists concluded bulls castrated on arrival have decreased performance, greater health risk, and greater health costs when compared to cattle that arrive as steers. (Source: Burciaga-Robles and co-workers. 2006 OSU Animal Science Research Report.)

University of Arkansas animal scientists studied two different castration methods of weaned male stocker calves. Castration of bull calves was done by banding or surgical castration. They also compared timing of castration.

Some of the bulls were castrated at arrival, after transportation stress, and compared to castration at 14 days after arrival. Comparable steer calves were used as controls in this experiment. There was an advantage in final weights and average daily gain between those animals that arrived as steers over those animals that arrived as bulls.

Steers gained an average of 22 more pounds during the course of the trials than bulls which required castration. Steers had greater average daily gain than bulls in each of the measured periods. Steers gained 3.52 lb/day during the first 7 days after arrival compared to only 1.58 lb/day for bulls.

Steers did not undergo the stress of castration during the receiving period, which could have allowed them to adapt more rapidly to their new environment. Bulls that were surgically castrated on arrival had greater final weights for the entire trial than calves that were banded on arrival.

These data could indicate that surgically castrating animals at the time of arrival would not add enough stress to the animal to yield detrimental growth performance. Postponing surgical castration to day 14 did result in lower final weights and average daily gains when compared to surgical castration at the time of arrival. Delaying castration did not have beneficial results on weight gains. (Source: Ratcliff and co-workers. 2005 Arkansas Animal Science Report.)

The bottom-line of these studies drive home is that buying steers from the sale barn can make a dramatic impact on a ranch's profitability. It all depends on how well a ranch can manage cattle health and processing stresses. Some operations would be dollars ahead to buy steers rather than cutter bulls.