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Castrating Bull Calves

A common discussion at small town coffee shops might sound something like this: "Is it worth the trouble to castrate male calves at 'calf working time' or should I just leave them to sell as 'cutter bulls'?"

An Oklahoma State University survey of eastern Oklahoma livestock markets in 1997 and 1999 showed that on average, bull calves were worth between \$2-\$3/cwt less than steers of similar weight at local sale barns. Studies in other states have suggested that bull calves are discounted even more.

In fact, two weeks ago at the Oklahoma City National Stockyards, 270 head of 468 pound feeder steers sold for \$132.57/cwt while 60 head of 478 pound feeder bull calves sold for \$124.66/cwt. Both groups were graded medium and large frame, number one muscling score. Therefore, the bulls which weighed 10 pounds more at sale actually returned \$24.55 less per animal.

However, that particular discount may still not be enough. Until the last few years, there has been very limited information available to Oklahoma cattle producers on the additional production costs associated with purchasing lightweight bulls vs. steers for use in a stocker operation. This happened to be the objective of several OSU studies evaluating differences in performance and health status of steers vs. knife-castrated or band-castrated bulls.

Stocker calves castrated well prior to purchase (steers) had significantly improved daily gain (2.35 lb/day vs. 1.77 lb/day) and dry matter intake (8.85 lb/day vs. 7.59 lb/day) compared with calves castrated after purchase and at processing (bulls). No difference was observed in the feed:gain ratio.

The number of times fed cattle were removed from their feeding pens for disease treatment was significantly less for steers versus bulls, suggesting a healthier appearance. In addition, the number of treatments and time of recovery tended to be lower in steers versus bulls.

Approximately one third (33.3%) of the steers had to be treated at least once; whereas 59.3% of the "cutter bulls" were treated at least once before being sold for harvest. None of the steers had to be pulled for treatment more than one time. However, 23.5% of the newly castrated bulls were treated more than once. The source of this data comes from Berry, et al. the 2001 OSU Animal Science Research Report.

Additional experiments comparing the effects of purchasing steers vs. bulls on performance, health, and economics are needed. Present data seems to suggest that lower costs per pound associated with purchasing bulls are outweighed by the additional cost of decreased performance and increased sickness.

Medical costs alone were much higher for bulls when compared to animals purchased as steers. Medical costs really escalate if cattle require more than one medical treatment.

As a general rule, cattle markets are putting more and more emphasis on value-based marketing of feeder calves. Cow calf producers can expect to see increasing discounts in the future for leaving male calves uncastrated.

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