News Column

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Growth promoting implant for calves

Most producers will work pairs before sending them to grass this spring. A growth promoting implant is a cost effective tool that can be used on calves over 30 to 45 days of age depending on the product. Use of the implant will increase weight per day of age, adding roughly 20 lbs. for the average calf at weaning. Typically we expect implants to increase average daily gain about 10 percent so for the calf that is gaining about 2 pounds per day the gain would be increased to 2.2 pounds per day for the life of the implant (around 100 days depending on product). A very conservative estimate of the return for the implant would be $30 and potentially close to twice that amount if the market remains strong. Implanting returns more revenue per dollar invested than any other management practice according to the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension.

Using one implant in a calf does not prevent the grower or finisher from gaining from the use of the same technology. If you are not using an implant for marketing reasons, make sure the premium for that market meets or exceeds the value of the added pounds from use of an implant. Despite being approved for more than 50 years, only 33 percent of cow/calf producers nationwide use growth-promoting implants. Implants have been shown to increase weaning weights of suckling calves in hundreds of research trials. Unless calves are marketed to a program that prohibits the use of implants, nursing calves intended for sale should be implanted prior to weaning.
There are just a few things to remember when using implants for light weight calves. First, select a low to medium potency implant intended for suckling calves. Pay attention to label directions for minimum age to implant. You can implant heifers intended for replacements once with no negative impacts on reproduction if you follow minimum age requirements. If you know heifers will be retained for replacements there is no advantage to implanting them. Use good technique when placing implants in the ear, use a sharp needle and disinfect the needle between uses.

When talking to consumers about the use of implants there are several points that might be useful. The level of hormones in a steak from an animal that was given a growth hormone implant containing estradiol (estrogen) is not much higher than a non-implanted animal, about 1.9 nanograms versus 1.7 nanograms, on average. The average difference, .2 nanograms per pound, is less than the natural fluctuation of hormones in the animal.

Many common food items, particularly of the legume family, contain estrogen. A 3 oz serving of peas, or cabbage or soy milk contain 340, 2000 and 11,250 nanogram (ng.) of estrogen respectively. One nanogram equals 1 billionth of a gram. Consumers also have the option to buy product that has not been implanted.

The “carbon footprint” for each pound of beef we buy today is 18 percent lower than it was a generation ago partly due to producers adopting technology that increases production efficiency. Experts in academia and food production agree that agriculture will have to continue to improve to ensure our growing global population has sufficient food; we’re going to need to grow food with maximum efficiency coupled with as little impact on the environment as possible.

Information provided by Sandy Johnson, NW Extension Livestock Specialist.