Producing Better Weaners

There is a price premium for the well grown and prepared, better quality weaners. This is clearly evident at the weaner sales, but also reflected in many on-farm sales of weaners.

Unfortunately, there are many lines of smaller, less conditioned weaners that often receive large price discounts. Some producers have little option other than producing lower value weaners because of the environment they have to cope with. But in many cases there are things that can be changed to increase the income from your weaners.

Markets for Weaners
Store weaners are purchased for a range of uses. The main market categories are:

Grass finishing
In this case, weaners are grown out and finished for slaughter for domestic or heavier export carcases. A wide range of weights and types suit this purpose. Even very light calves will grow out given enough time and good feed.

Grow-out calves
These calves are grown out for resale, primarily to feedlots. It is essential to produce weaners that fit the end market requirements of the feedlots that will eventually buy the grown calves. Breed and maturity pattern are important, as they will influence the price paid to the weaner buyer when the calves are re-sold.

Contact your feedlot to obtain their particular requirements.

Feeder Calves
Feeder calves progress to backgrounding where the major focus is nutrition and management during their grow-out phase to ensure they meet the strict feedlot entry specifications.

MSA Grading
The MSA grading system has been embraced by some major supermarkets.

The MSA grading model takes into account a series of factors that affect meat quality. These include breed, carcase weight for maturity (ossification), marbling and meat color. Registering for MSA is a simple process, see www.mla.com.au.

EU Accreditation
- EU Accreditation may be the key to increased profitability on Weaners.
- Cattle must have come through an EU accredited supply chain: producer, feedlot, saleyard.
- NLIS: each individual must be able to be traced through the NLIS database.
- HGP free: cattle must be free of hormone growth promotants.

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) administers the European Union Cattle Accreditation Scheme (EUCAS). It is a voluntary scheme, with no application fee.

If you are interested in seeking EU accreditation, contact the AQIS.

Herd Management
Many areas have weaner sales held at specific times of the year. In spring calving areas, the weaner sales are held in autumn. In autumn calving areas the weaner sales are held in the summer. The timing of these sales dictate much of the annual herd management routine. The lack of flexibility in selling time is a big disadvantage to weaner production.

The sales go ahead even if the season is poor. If the traditional buying districts are also experiencing a bad season, prices can be very depressed.
To meet the fixed sale time, calving times are often pushed earlier so that sale calves are as well grown as possible when sold. These earlier calving times can put a lot of pressure on cows. Herd fertility is critical. Short joining seasons with high proportions of calves born early result in more uniform lines of weaners for sale. This can be difficult to achieve if cows are calving at a time of year to suit the market rather than the season.

Careful reproductive management is essential for profitable weaner production. The number of sale calves produced per year has a large impact on profits. Cows must be in good condition at the start of joining. Some supplementary feeding may be needed to achieve this. Cows and heifers must be joined to sound, active fertile bulls. Bulls should be tested for soundness annually, well before joining and supplemented if required.

Genetics
Well bred calves with good growth, muscle and condition stand out. Over the past decade well-bred Angus weaners have received consistent premiums in most weaner sales. The premiums are due to the demand for calves suitable for a range of markets, including live export to countries such as Russia and Kazakhstan.

To breed good weaners, you need to use good bulls. The widespread use of performance information makes it easier to select bulls that have the genetic package to meet your needs. If you want to increase growth or change maturity type, the information supplied on Angus Group BREEPLAN recorded bulls together with your visual assessment can help you make better bull selection decisions. Knowing how your weaners have performed before can have major advantages. Obtaining buyer feedback is vital and getting hold of it is your responsibility.

Weaning Methods
Weaning should be as stress-free as possible for the calves.

Yard weaning
Yard weaning requires more labour and may be more expensive than some other methods. However, it has several benefits:

- The calves become accustomed to the yards and being handled and worked through the yards.
- It introduces calves to handfeeding.
- Group socialisation, which may reduce stresses in later life from confinement and overcrowding.

As adult cattle on farm, at saleyards and abattoirs, yard weaned cattle are quieter and easier to handle in yards.

The weaning program may last up to 10 - 14 days and includes feeding, drafting, working through the race and yarding from adjoining paddocks.

Animals that do not settle down can be marked for future culling. Temperamental animals are not suitable for feedlot or intensive fattening systems.

Yard weaned calves should be fed good quality hay or silage and have ample water.
**Abrupt separation**

Abrupt separation is a common weaning practice. The calves are drafted from the cows and moved as far away as possible. The cows and calves are difficult to move to their respective paddocks and both take longer to settle down. It is more stressful than other methods for both the cow and calf. The more determined animals often break through fences to get back to each other or, alternatively, walk the fences.

**Gradual separation**

The cows and calves are put in adjoining paddocks on either side of a secure fence. The cows will move to water and graze away for extended periods while the calves will group together on the fence. After 4-5 days the cows are moved to a more distant paddock.

It it important that the calves find the water. A few older animals in the mob may help settle the calves and teach them the run of the paddock.

**Creep weaning**

Creep weaning is a gradual “self weaning” process. It causes minimal stress to the calves but requires more preparation and supervision.

As the calves approach weaning age, give them access to a good quality pasture, or supplement crop in an adjoining paddock. A specially constructed “creep gate” or opening in the fence line or gateway allows the calves to pass through, but not the cows. The opening in the creep should be 400 - 450mm wide.

The calves become accustomed to grazing away from the cows in the adjoining paddock. Close the creeping gate off at weaning time, leaving all the calves on one side of the fence, cows on the other. After a few more days move the cows away.

**Implications for Weaner Management**

Ideally, calves should grow at a moderate rate before weaning, 0.7 - 0.8kg a day. If not, early weaning is an option if the calves are fed to achieve the required weight gain.

After weaning, cattle destined for feedlots requiring marbling should be grown at a moderate rate: 0.6 - 0.8kg per day, to achieve the required feedlot entry weights.

**Health Program**

Weaning is a suitable time to further develop the Herd Health Preventative Program. Practices include:
- booster or first vaccinations for reproductive / non reproductive diseases,
- external parasite control
- internal parasite control
A well planned internal parasite program is important for weaner calves as they are very susceptible to worms - particularly Ostertagia.

The drench program should be coordinated with the development of a “clean safe” weaning paddock. The purpose of a clean safe paddock is to reduce the number of worms on pasture. The worms in the cattle are readily controlled by the use of efficient drenches. The safe pasture is developed in autumn / winter by preventing pasture contamination with worm eggs.

The pasture can be prepared in several ways:
- pasture spelling, but this is not always practical
- grazing the paddock with sheep
- grazing the mature cattle which are more resistant to worms and therefore shed less worm eggs on the pasture

The weaners are drenched and then placed on the safe pasture.

**Transport**
Prepare cattle for travel. Don’t put cattle straight onto the truck full of green feed. Before transport, cattle should be yarded and provided with water and good quality hay.

Filling up on dry feed will mean less moist dung in the truck and therefore cleaner weaners with less injuries. This feed type also last longer in their digestive tract.

Angus Australia’s Assured Angus and Angus Sired tags enable buyers to clearly identify progeny carrying Angus genetics. These tags can be ordered from Angus Australia. In most cases tagged calves have achieved prices that have more than covered the tag cost.

**Selling Strategies other than to weaner sales**
A selling option with a number of advantages is electronic auctions. Comprehensive information is provided for each sale lot. This may include photos and video.

Another option for breeders looking for more feedback on the performance of their weaners is to retain ownership further down the production line. This can be in the form of keeping some of your steers and agisting them for sale later, putting them in a feedlot, or placing them with a backgrounder to grow them out for later feedlot entry.

There are a variety of retained ownership alternatives available that can be profitable. Some agents offer help in organising these arrangements for their clients. Explore the options, especially in the tough years when weaner prices are low. Retained ownership can increase risk, but attractive returns are possible if your cattle perform well. One of the benefits of owning your cattle further down the production line is that you own the information. It is a form of guaranteed feedback.

Further information is available from MLA or your local Department of Primary Industries.

*Sources: Angus Australia, Meat and Livestock Australia & NSW Department of Primary Industries.*

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