

Cow Calf: To Castrate Or Not To Castrate??

A question commonly discussed around small town coffee shops would sound 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'?"

A survey conducted by Oklahoma State University of eastern Oklahoma livestock markets in 1997 and 1999 showed that on average, bull calves were \$2.00-3.00/cwt less expensive than steers of similar weight. Other studies in other states have suggested that bull calves are currently being discounted even more. In fact, last week at the Oklahoma City National Stockyards, 416 pound feeder steer calves sold for \$127.00/cwt while 400 pound feeder bull calves sold for \$121.00/cwt. Both groups were graded medium and large frame, number one muscling score. Therefore the bulls that weighed only 16 pounds less, returned \$44.32 less per animal. The discount gets even wider as the cattle get older and larger. A group of 626 pound feeder steers sold for 109.24/cwt in the same sale that 635 pound feeder bulls brought \$94.00/cwt. In this situation the bulls, that weighed 9 pounds more, brought a whopping \$86.94 per head less than the steers.

However, some of the discounts may still not be enough. Until the last few years, there has been very little information available to Oklahoma producers on the additional production costs associated with purchasing lightweight bulls vs. steers for use in a stocker operation. Therefore, the objective of several OSU studies was to evaluate 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) for 42 days compared with calves castrated after purchase and at processing (bulls). No difference was observed in the feed:gain ratio. The number of times removed from the pen 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. One third (33.3%) of the steers were treated at least once; whereas 59.3% of the "cutter bulls" were treated at least once. None of the steers were treated more than one time; whereas 23.5% of the newly castrated bulls were treated more than once. (Berry, et al. 2001 OSU Animal Science Research Report).

Although more experiments comparing the effects of purchasing steers vs. bulls on performance, health, and economics are needed, data suggests that the lower costs per pound associated with purchasing bulls are out-weighed by the additional cost of decreased performance and increased sickness. Medical costs were much higher for bulls compared to animals purchased as steers. Medical costs escalate when cattle require more than one medical treatment. As the cattle markets put more and more emphasis on value-based marketing of feeder calves, cow calf producers can expect to be discounted increasingly for leaving male calves un-castrated.

Source: Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist