



final report

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Prepared by: Enoch L Bergman DVM
Swans Veterinary Services
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Feedlot Best Practice Management – Pregnant Heifers

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Abstract

The Feedlot Best Practice Management Guide for Managing Pregnant Heifers was developed to assist the managers and health personnel of Australian feedlots to develop protocols to manage the welfare and financial consequences of pregnant livestock, calving heifers, and newborn calves within the lot feeding sector. The manual in hard copy format is available to all NFAS accredited feedlots and MLA grain-fed members.

Executive summary

The project was designed to produce a best practice guide for feedlot personnel for the management of pregnant heifers on feed, facilitating the development of unique Pregnancy and Calving Management Plans for individual feedlots. The guide was based upon the experiences of the author and a literature review of current information relating to the topic, and circulated to NFAS accredited feedlots in hard copy format.

The National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme (NFAS) Standards, updated in November 2017, requires all accredited feedlots to develop and implement documented management practices to manage the welfare needs of pregnant livestock and newborn calves within the lot feeding sector. Further, within the NFAS Standards, livestock within two to four weeks of parturition, dependent upon jurisdiction, are considered unfit to load unless their total transport time, including time off water prior to the journey, is less than four hours.

The guide, available to all NFAS accredited feedlots and MLA Grain-fed members outlines the financial risks, psychological risks to personnel, and animal welfare risks associated with pregnant heifers or calves born from heifers whilst on feed. The implications of pregnancy upon feedlot performance and carcass value is explored, citing published references.

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1 Background

Lot feeders will benefit from quantifying the risk of pregnancies within their own enterprise and developing a management plan designed to reduce the number of pregnant heifers going on to feed, to identify and manage pregnant heifers that are on feed, and to recognize and assist calving heifers as appropriate.

To address these concerns, the National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme outlines that all accredited feedlots are required to develop and implement management practices to manage the welfare of pregnant livestock and new born calves.

2 Project objectives

The guide was developed to present options to feedlot managers and their personnel to assist them in developing protocols for managing pregnancies and calving heifers within their own unique enterprises to address their NFAS requirements, improve welfare outcomes and optimize heifer carcass values.

3 Approach

3.1 Outline NFAS Requirements

The National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme (NFAS) requires all accredited feedlots to develop and implement documented management practices to manage the animal welfare needs of pregnant livestock and newborn calves within the lot feeding sector. Livestock, within two to four weeks of parturition, dependent upon jurisdiction, are considered unfit to load unless their total transport time, including time off water prior to the journey, is less than four hours. The NFAS Standards were recently updated as of November 2017. Sub-sections LM3 and LM4 specifically deal with the management of pregnancy and calves relating to transport and animal welfare (See Appendix).

3.2 Manual Development

The manual was developed by Enoch Bergman, D.V.M, in consultation with Meat & Livestock Australia and the Australia Lot Feeders Association. The manual is available to all NFAS accredited feedlot and MLA grain-fed members in hard copy format.

Topics covered by the manual included the following:

- Developing a pregnancy and calving management plan
- Quantifying the problem
- Pregnancy Diagnosis
- Pregnancy and carcass value considerations
- Pregnancy management plan
 - Strategies to reduce the number of pregnant heifers calving on feed from high risk vendors
 - Pre-feedlot procurement strategies
 - Processing strategies incorporating pregnancy diagnosis

- Processing strategies without pregnancy diagnosis
- Reactive strategies
- o Calving management plan
- o Heifers that have already calved

4 Discussion

Preventing calves from being born on feedlots is the ultimate goal, but ensuring that those that are born are managed to the best of our ability for the best welfare outcome for them and their dams is not only achievable but imperative for our psychological welfare, the welfare of our labour force and the ongoing support of those who consume our product.

The goal of the Best Practice Management Guide is to cue feedlot managers and personnel to critically assess their own management practices and to seek to improve aspects of their heifer pregnancy management protocols where possible. Integrating a structured pregnancy management protocol should have a positive impact upon heifer and calf welfare outcomes, improve close out values, and protect the reputation of the lot feeding industry.

Recognition of the costs associate with inappropriate pregnancies could help drive demand for properly prepared and protocolled calves across all sectors of the beef supply chain. Ensuring marketed heifers are not pregnant prior to sale could become part of a wider marketing strategy including yard weaning, pre-vaccination, and other preparatory procedures such as deworming, dehorning, and castration.

5 Conclusions/recommendations

The Australian lot feeding sector would benefit from any procedure or management change which would reduce the incidence of pregnant heifers arriving at feedlots. To drive change the industry needs to understand the scale of the problem and develop strategies to either directly or indirectly deliver premiums for guaranteed empty heifers.

5.1.1 Outreach and Promotion

The best practice guide was developed for a lot feeding target audience, however, the calving intervention proportion of the guide may stimulate interest within the cow/calf sector, driving awareness of the direct cost of heifer pregnancies to feedlotters, and ultimately to cow/calf producers in the form of discounts. The ideal situation for the lot feeding industry would be for no pregnant animals to enter the feedlot, however, the onus of ensuring that this is the case rests primarily with the cow/calf producer. Field days focusing on calving intervention, the value of pregnancy testing, and the cost of unwanted pregnancies arriving at Australian feedlots, could insight interest amongst cow/calf producers providing ALFA a platform to drive change.

6 Appendix

6.1 National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme Guidelines Nov 2017 Version

6.1.1 Element LM3

ELEMENT LM3 – Livestock Transport

OUTCOME: *The risk of injury; bruising; hide and skin damage during transportation of stock is minimised.*

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS:

Section 1

A person in charge must exercise duty of care to ensure the welfare of livestock under their control and compliance with the *Animal Welfare Standards & Guidelines – Land Transport of Livestock* (as amended or superseded). The consignor is responsible for livestock welfare during:

Subsection B

1. Preparation, including selection as fit for the intended journey are in accordance with the MLA published document "*Is it Fit to Load*" (as amended). An animal is not fit for a journey if it is known to be, or visually assessed to be within two (2) weeks of parturition, unless the water deprivation time and journey is less than four (4) hours duration to another property.

6.1.2 Element LM4

ELEMENT LM4 – Animal Welfare

OUTCOME: *The welfare of livestock is not compromised whilst within the control of persons responsible for their care and well-being, and that prompt and appropriate remedial action is taken when required.*

Performance Indicators

Section 11

If an Enterprise feeds female cattle, a *Pregnancy and Calving Management Plan* has been documented and implemented in order to manage the welfare of cows/ heifers and calves.