



Handling the Calf at Branding Time

Richard F. Hall, DVM
Donald G. Waldhalm, PhD
Peter J. South, DVM

Branding time is one of the most important times when all beef calves are handled. Usually this is one of the last times before the grazing season that you will be able to carry out the necessary vaccinations, castrations, branding, ear tagging or implanting.

As in other seasons, you should have handling chutes and pens, vaccine syringes, needles, knives and dehorner in good working condition. These precautions can save valuable time and help prevent unnecessary injury to animals and people.

Working Facilities

Your working pens should permit you to separate the calves from the cows before you start processing the calves. Put the calves in pens where they can easily be worked through a chute. We recommend a calf table for working calves. Many different types are available. They should be designed with a squeeze and a head catch as well as a tilt mechanism to secure the calf in a horizontal position. Make sure the side bars can be taken down to allow ample room for branding and castrating and keep enough space around the head for dehorning. Tilting calf chutes or tables raise the calves off the dirt for better sanitation during castration and dehorning.

Castration and Dehorning Procedures

Castration. Many methods of castration have been practiced including surgical, burdizzos and elastrator bands. They all have value but with each method the operator must be aware of the advantages and disadvantages.

We prefer surgical castration if it is performed correctly. With surgical castration, bottom or side drainage of the scrotum is of prime importance.

Removing the tunic (striffen) which surrounds the testicles and cord is also important because this lining is very susceptible to infection. Small calves can be castrated with a knife if the cord is shredded to control bleeding and not cut off squarely. For larger calves, the cords should be clamped with a crushing type of emasculator or ligated to control blood. When castrating surgically, always remove as much of the cord as possible to reduce the possibility of infection. Some prefer to pull the testicles and cords as is done when castrating lambs. However, this method does present a danger of internal hemorrhage and rupture.

Following surgical castration, make certain fat or other tissue does not protrude beyond the skin of the scrotum since these tissues can delay healing and encourage infections. Follow strict sanitation in surgical castration. Use compounds for fly control.

Elastrator bands have gained a great deal of popularity through the years because they do not require surgery. They reduce the risk of hemorrhage and virtually eliminate fly problems. The disadvantages are increased incidence of tetanus, increased time of stress on the calf and increased numbers of stags caused by failure to include both testes in the scrotum below the constricting band. In areas of screw worms or other extreme fly problems, this may be the method of choice.

The use of the burdizzo has largely been discontinued because of the high prevalence of stags. The burdizzo, which severs the cord through the scrotum without surgery, is a good method if you are careful to crush both cords individually twice. Tetanus or flies are not a problem with correct use of this method.

Dehorning. If your calves need dehorning, do it at the youngest age possible. New methods include the injection of calcium chloride under the horn buds before they become attached to the skull. The calcium chloride method is still experimental and should be done only by experienced operators.

Dehorning pastes have been tried from time to time but usually are not widely used. If the head becomes wet from rain, the paste may run and blind the calf or burn the face. "Scurs" are also often a problem when pastes are used.

Some use hot iron cautery for dehorning. An experienced operator can do an excellent job with this method as long as the horns are just buds. An inexperienced operator often gets excess "scurs" and deformed horns which can cause problems later.

Surgical removal of the horns is usually the method of choice if the horns have much size. A commercial dehorner can be used for smaller horns and a saw is usually used for larger ones.

Clip the hair around the horns and wash the area to prevent dirt from contaminating the wound and blood from pooling in the area of horn removal. Dirt and blood serve as sources of infection. Pull the cornual arteries after surgical removal. Apply a disinfectant and hemostatic powder and place a gauze pad over the holes of the sinus if it is exposed. If the dehorning is done correctly and the arteries are pulled, cautery powders or pastes should not be needed. In fly season, fly repellents should be used.

Anesthetics are generally not used in dehorning cattle unless the horns are quite large. If anesthetics are necessary, have your veterinarian show you how or have him perform the operation. If you feed hay or other feed to the cattle after dehorning, be careful not to throw the feed over their heads since infection of the sinus may occur.

Vaccinations and Implants

You should vaccinate all calves against blackleg and malignant edema at branding time. Other vaccines against such diseases as enterotoxemia, black disease or *Cl. sordellii* may be necessary depending upon the prevalence of these diseases in your area.

You may need to vaccinate your cows and bulls against BVD, IBR, vibriosis and leptospirosis, depending upon the prevalence of these diseases. Check with your veterinarian on the need for vaccines for your herd.

Consider growth-promoting implants for nursing calves that you do not intend to save for breeding. Implants can make you money if they are used correctly. Read and follow the directions carefully.

Animal Identification and Records

Identifying individual animals is essential to an efficient cow-calf operation. Records pertaining to cow-calf pairs should be made as soon as possible after birth. Branding time provides an excellent opportunity to substantiate these records and to identify the dams of inferior quality calves.

The Authors — Richard F. Hall, DVM, is extension veterinarian and extension professor of veterinary medicine; Donald G. Waldhalm, PhD, is associate professor of veterinary microbiology; and Peter J. South, DVM, is assistant professor of veterinary medicine. Dr. Hall and Dr. Waldhalm are in the Veterinary Research Lab located at the University of Idaho Research and Extension Center, Caldwell, and Dr. South is in the Department of Veterinary Science, University of Idaho, Moscow.
