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Processing Calves With Xylazine Holly Neaton, DVM

Some people enjoy doing cattle chute work. Fifteen years ago I thought it was fun to play cowboy veterinarian. I soon discovered that all the blood, pain bawling and rough handling was not what I went to veterinary school for. I noticed that people who had never observed cattle run through a chute to be dehorned and castrated felt the same way I did—that it was generally inhumane even though it is a necessary process and we try to do it as quickly as possible. And it does bring in good money to a practice.

I externed with a dairy practice in Wisconsin that did not own a portable cattle chute. They did own a capture gun and a pole syringe but the majority of dehorning was encouraged to be done young with the help of xylazine. I was really impressed with how easy this was to do. You could create an assembly line once the calves dropped and do everything needed all by yourself. Vaccinate, dehorn, remove dewclaws and extra teats, delouse and deworm, castrate and implant. The majority of them sleep right through the whole process. I brought this back to my practice and it was quickly accepted and appreciated by our clients.

I have to mention that using xylazine in cattle is off label. With that in mind I will give you dosages and suggestions that I have found to be helpful. I personally consider sedating calves in this manner very safe and have never lost a calf due to the sedation.

1. Work with groups of less than about 12. Unless you are really fast or have extra help the sedation may not last long enough for you to finish the last calves.
2. Demand fresh deep bedding and good light.
3. Try to crowd the calves in a corner with a gate or panel. Give them all their injections of xylazine at once and mark them with a chalk or spray.
4. I prefer to castrate them right before they lay down as it is less awkward than after they are laying down but this isn't always possible.
5. Try to allow them to spread out when they fall. The first one is often down by the time you get done injecting the last. They could conceivably suffocate if they fall on top of each other.
6. If there are any that don't need processing, get them out of the pen so they don't stomp all over the down calves.
7. The dose I use is .1 mg per pound IM. You have probably noticed that younger calves are more susceptible to the effects of xylazine than older calves. Therefore I tend to give them a little higher doses when the calves get over 500# or so. I will also add some lidocaine to the cornual nerve if the horns need to be sawed off. Xylazine is not an analgesic and asking the animal to lie still for sawing horns is too much.
8. Most of the time I can do the work needed without any other restraint by pressing their heads into their sides with my knees as they are lying. Once in a while with larger

calves you will need a halter wrapped around a rear leg and someone to help you hold the calf down.

9. Leave the calves lying sternally. I am always afraid they may bloat if they are left lying on their sides.

10. You can easily recheck all of them for bleeders and take care of them right away.

I realize that this is only appropriate for smaller herds and cattle chutes are indispensable for large groups of cattle. I found this procedure easy to do at monthly herd checks and especially at hobby farms with poor facilities.