



Want More Profit from Stocker Calves This Spring?

By Jackie Nix

Stocker cattle represent a great opportunity to turn forages into profit for the savvy cattleman. The keys to a successful stocker program lie in four areas: pasture management, cost control, proper marketing and animal management.

Pasture Management

One of the cheapest things you can do to increase weight gain in your stocker calves is to properly fertilize and lime your pastures. Properly fertilized forages contain more of the nutrients that cattle need to gain weight quickly. The best way to go about fertilizing and liming your pastures is to take a soil sample several months before the forage growing season (for example, take a soil sample in the early fall for winter wheat or ryegrass). Based on the results of the soil sample lime and/or fertilize the pasture accordingly.

Another important aspect of pasture management is weed control. For every pound of weeds in your pasture there is one less pound of usable forages for your stocker calves. Your local Sweetlix dealer or Cooperative Extension agent can help you choose the correct herbicide and advise you on the correct time to apply them to remove unwanted weeds.

Cost Control

Obviously, to make money raising stocker cattle you have to sell the cattle for more than you put in them. Carefully controlling input costs like feed, medication, supplements, etc. and making sure that these items result in added benefits that are worth the cost is crucial. It is beneficial to keep a record of all costs incurred, not only for tax purposes, but to help you determine your breakeven costs for future years.

Proper Marketing

Raising big, healthy stocker calves means little if you are unable to attain the best possible price for them. The first step in a successful marketing plan is to purchase cattle types that sell well in your area. For example, black-baldie stocker cattle are in high demand while eared-breeds such as the Zebu-crosses are in low demand in sale barns. Pound for pound, black-baldie will more often than not, bring a better price than Zebu-crosses no matter how good the Zebu-cross cattle.

The next step is to find out what the buyers prefer in terms of a final weight. If the buyers in your area prefer 6 CWT cattle, it will do you no good to keep your stockers on the pastures until they are 8 CWTs.

Proper Animal Management

When processing stocker calves, it makes sense to perform a few management procedures to increase their value. These include castrating bull calves and dehorning any horned cattle, as well as deworming and vaccinating all calves. The mere act of dehorning and castrating will increase the calves' value by

several cents per pound at sale time. Vaccinating and deworming cattle will reduce your death losses and increase productivity because sick cattle don't efficiently gain weight.

Properly matching cattle-types to available forages will also maximize productivity and weight gain. The highest quality forages should be matched up with lightweight calves, while heavier calves can be placed on slightly more mature, less nutritious forages with no loss in production.

Make sure that calves have free access to water and a complete mineral supplement. A lack of either will reduce feed intake and thus reduce potential weight gains. It is also a good idea to supplement stocker calves with an ionophore to increase feed efficiency and weight gains. Feeding an ionophore to stocker cattle allows you to graze more calves on the same amount of pasture (without decreasing weight gain!) or graze the same number of calves for a longer period of time. Either way you end up with more pounds of cattle at the end of the grazing period as compared to not supplementing with an ionophore. More pounds at the sale barn means more money in your pocket!

How Does an Ionophore Increase Feed Efficiency?

The ionophores [monensin (Rumensin[®]) or lasalocid (Bovatec[®])] alter the population of rumen bugs to increase the amount of "good" bacteria and decrease the populations of "bad" bacteria. These "good" bacteria produce higher amounts of propionic acid. The reason that this is important is that a calf utilizes acetic acid, butyric acid and propionic acid produced by the rumen bugs as energy. However, the calf is able to more efficiently convert propionic acid into energy than either butyric acid or acetic acid. More propionic acid means more energy for the calf, resulting in greater weight gains. The "bad" bacteria produce more acetic acid, butyric acid, carbon dioxide and methane resulting in more wasted energy from your forages.

Why Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks?

With so many options available, why are Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks the best option for stocker cattle operators wishing to feed an ionophore? Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks provide what is needed without the extra costs associated with unnecessary protein supplements. When high quality forages are available to stocker cattle, the protein levels in these forages are typically adequate to meet the needs of growing stocker calves, so extra protein usually isn't needed. Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks provide essential levels of minerals and vitamins in addition to Rumensin[®] for added weight gain without the cost of protein that you don't need.

Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks provide consistent daily intake resulting in maximum weight gains. Cattle can be expected to gain 0.20 to 0.25 additional pounds per day* as compared to those receiving no ionophore. This consistent intake means that input costs are known, allowing the stocker cattle operator to accurately estimate operating costs and determine breakeven costs. The average cost** for Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Blocks is \$0.09 per head per day. Assuming that the value of the extra gain is \$0.85 per pound, use of Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Blocks results in an extra profit of \$0.08 to \$0.12 per head per day on these stocker calves.

As cattle theft continues to be a concern in some parts of the country, the fact that Sweetlix[®] Rumensin[®] Pressed Blocks are consumed consistently on a daily basis reduces cattle theft risk. Cattle receiving supplement from blocks are less likely to come running when a pick-up truck enters the pasture, thereby reducing the ease with which cattle rustlers can round up and load your cattle onto a trailer.

And probably the greatest advantage of the Sweetlix® Rumensin® Pressed Blocks is their ease of use. These weather-resistant blocks can be placed right out in the pasture with the calves. Maintenance merely involves keeping the proper number of blocks available to the calves at all times.

In conclusion, a successful stocker operation involves several factors including: proper management of pastures to ensure adequate supplies of high quality forages; careful management of input costs to ensure that costs incurred result in added benefits; proper marketing of cattle to get the best price; and proper management of the calves to ensure that they are efficiently gaining weight on available pastures. A very effective supplement, which will increase feed efficiency in stocker cattle is the Sweetlix® Rumensin® Pressed Block. For more information about these supplement blocks and how they can benefit your stocker operation, contact your local Sweetlix® dealer or call 1-800-325-1486 or visit our website at www.sweetlix.com.

*While these results are typical, individual weight gains may be more or less than that stated due to differences in cattle types, environment, management practices, etc.

**Prices will vary according to location

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*Rumensin is a registered trademark of Elanco Animal Health
Bovatec is a registered trademark of Alpharma Animal Health Division*

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Tips for Maximizing Stocker Performance

1. Provide continual access to **Sweetlix® Rumensin® Blocks** at the recommended rate of 1 block per 5 head of cattle. Separate blocks by at least 10-20 feet and situate blocks in areas where cattle congregate.
2. Maintain proper stocking rates on pastures. Over-stocking reduces animal gains, while under-stocking reduces the pounds of beef produced per acre and increases production costs.
3. Properly fertilize and lime stocker pastures to maximize forage nutritional quality. Your local Cooperative Extension service can help you take soil tests to determine what levels of fertilizer and lime are needed.
4. Manage forages for maximum performance. This includes rotational grazing systems, matching cattle types to available forage types, proper weed management and the harvesting or clipping of forages to keep them in a vegetative (highly nutritional) state.
5. Maintain a proper health program. Deworm and vaccinate all calves at receiving and don't forget about external parasites.
6. Always provided access to plenty of clean, fresh water and try to limit the distance that cattle have to travel to water. Time spent walking to/from water is less time spent grazing and gaining weight. Also, inadequate water intake will limit forage intake and thus limit weight gains.