

BACKGROUNDING OF CALVES FOR BEEF FATTENING



Backgrounding is a beef production system that involves maximum use of pasture and forages starting from weaning of calves until feedlot fattening.

The weight gain during backgrounding comes primarily from muscle and frame development with minor contribution from fattening. These weight gains are as economical as possible by making maximum use of forages such as hay and silage in addition to free pasture feeding and occasional use of grains.

Important points to consider while developing a backgrounding program are:

- Ensure that all calves are pre-conditioned. This includes weaning approximately 6 weeks before sale, starting on feed, dehorning, vaccinating for respiratory disease, deworming, and castration of male calves. This ensures good health of calves before joining a backgrounding program.
- Group the calves according to age, weight and sex to increase their value at market time. Generally, calves less than 8 months of age in above-average body condition are not suitable because they lose weight and condition rapidly when fed high roughage rations. Hence, calves aged 8-9 months with 120-140 kg body weight in thin to moderate body condition are considered best for backgrounding programs. These calves are ready for finishing when they reach 240-280 kg, and usually are in high demand by beef processors and exporters.
- Skilful livestock and feeding management combined with a good preventative health plan is essential. Good forage management can be achieved by harvesting forages at their optimum stage of maturity for highest nutrient content. Pastures should include a mixture of legumes and grasses. Legumes are used to increase forage yield and protein content, while preventing drastic reduction in pasture production and quality that often occurs during the summer months.
- Well-designed animal handling facilities to decrease stress factor are essential for a successful health program.
- When purchasing calves, provide first-cutting grass-legume hay, offer small amounts of grain, and increase the amount over a week to 10 days to about 2 pounds per head daily.
- Initially corn silage will usually be offered in small amounts and increased as intake increases over a week to 10 days. Round-bale silage is an excellent exclusive feed for backgrounding calves, particularly when the feed is a grass-legume mixture.
- Design the feeders so that smaller calves have access to the feed.
- Monitor hay consumption because spoilage can occur if hay is not eaten fast enough.
- Urea supplements used as a protein source are not well-utilized by new cattle at the onset of a high-roughage-based feeding program.
- Calcium supplements mixed with salt (two parts commercial salt mix with supplemental vitamin A and one-part limestone) should be available freely when using corn silage and grain diets. Most good quality hay contains sufficient calcium and phosphorus, but the commercial salt mixture with supplemental vitamin A should adequately be made available.
- Provide ample clean, fresh, frost-free water for calves at all times. Likewise, it is equally important to check that all calves have easy access to water.
- Calves should have proper identification through ear tags.
- Vaccinations should be given when purchased cattle arrive, or at weaning.
- Ensure to purchase calves which had been castrated and dehorned minimum two weeks before weaning. If not, then calves should not be castrated until they have acclimatized and recovered from stress. Depending on the weather, the recommended waiting period is 10-15 days.
- Deworming and treatment for external parasites should be done separately from other practices to avoid excessive stress.