Missing the Mark

I heard a great quote last month on the evening news. “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” The honesty of those words struck me as we begin a new year. Our past transgressions are just that… in the past. While some mistakes carry heavier consequences than others, we all can try to do better in the future.

My friend Mike Klumpp, Pastor of Locust Cove and Rich Valley Presbyterian Churches, often shares that the definition of sin is “missing the mark.” Taking that thought into the business world of farming. Anyone who has ever farmed for a length of time has made an error and missed the mark.

We are only 4 days into 2025, and yet we acknowledge that there are already people who have broken their new year resolutions they made to themselves. I can understand that the start of a new year is a logical point to starting a new you, but why is it that if our resolve falls short, we feel the need to wait for a full calendar year to begin again?

Many of you remember Walter Robinson from his long tenure as Smyth County Ag Agent. A saying attributed to Walter is about waiting around to begin a task, especially a dreaded one. Walter advises that “it takes the same amount of time to do something the right way at the right time, as it will if you put it off.” Walter recognized that putting something off carries a penalty of missing opportunities… like selling calves at their highest return per pound or baling hay at its highest nutritional value… with little to no gain on one’s time.

One thing that I have noticed in the last 50+ years is that successful farmers look to capitalize on future markets rather than duplicating past successes. The differences between the two approaches can be subtle but they exist.

In short, if you are trying to farm the same way your family did 30-60 years ago, you are likely missing opportunities to get paid more for much the same work. For example, many of us sold calves straight off the cow, essentially weaning them on the truck.

Research shows that one of the most vulnerable times in the life of a calf is the six-week period following weaning. If they start that stretch of time taking a cold truck ride to a strange new place… well, the stress level just went to a higher gear.

The six-week period also makes sense from a nutritional and physiological perspective as well. When a calf is born, their rumen (the part of the stomach that allows cattle to convert grass into meat and ice cream) is not developed.

At the end of the calf’s esophagus is the esophageal groove, a structure that will eventually disappear, but while the calf is on a diet of milk, it helps milk travel straight to the abomasum (the stomach most like our own) so it can be utilized to the fullest.

As the calf grows and nibbles on grass, hay and grain fiber sources, the rumen begins to develop and by weaning, the rumen is ready to begin work. The trouble is the rumen microflora are not ready.

Rumen microflora are bacteria that live in the rumen that help break down fiber and starches that the ruminant ingests. The issue is that the bacteria are not interchangeable. Some mesh with fiber better, others excel at breaking down grains like corn. At weaning, the calf’s newly developed rumen has neither in abundance so growing those symbiotic relationships takes time.

How much time? Generally, 6 weeks. This is why most backgrounding programs want calves to be weaned for at least 45 days. The calf will do all this transferring in familiar surroundings, and this is the basis behind backgrounding programs like the VQA program.

Buyers are willing to pay more for calves when the risk of them suffering from morbidity or mortality is lowered.

Winter is an excellent time to explore new technologies and methods in agricultural enterprises. Many farm shows and seminars are coming up to help you get back on track and hit the mark!

Upcoming Events

Jan 7 VQA Sale

Jan 13 VQA Steer Take Up

Jan 15 VQA Heifer Take Up

Jan 18 VT Beef Health Conference, Campus

Jan 28 VFGC Winter Conference, Wytheville

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodation to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at 276-706-8339 /TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.