



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

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Grafting Calves

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Grafting calves to a new cow is often a necessary practice for cow-calf operations. Many cattle producers graft calves to avoid raising an orphan calf artificially, which saves time and money. Grafting calves also maintains cow/ranch productivity. A calf may be grafted if the mother cow dies, a calf dies, twins are born, or a cow has a bad udder, or low or no milk production.

When grafting calves, the cattle producer must keep in mind how strong the sense of smell is to a cow.

Methodology

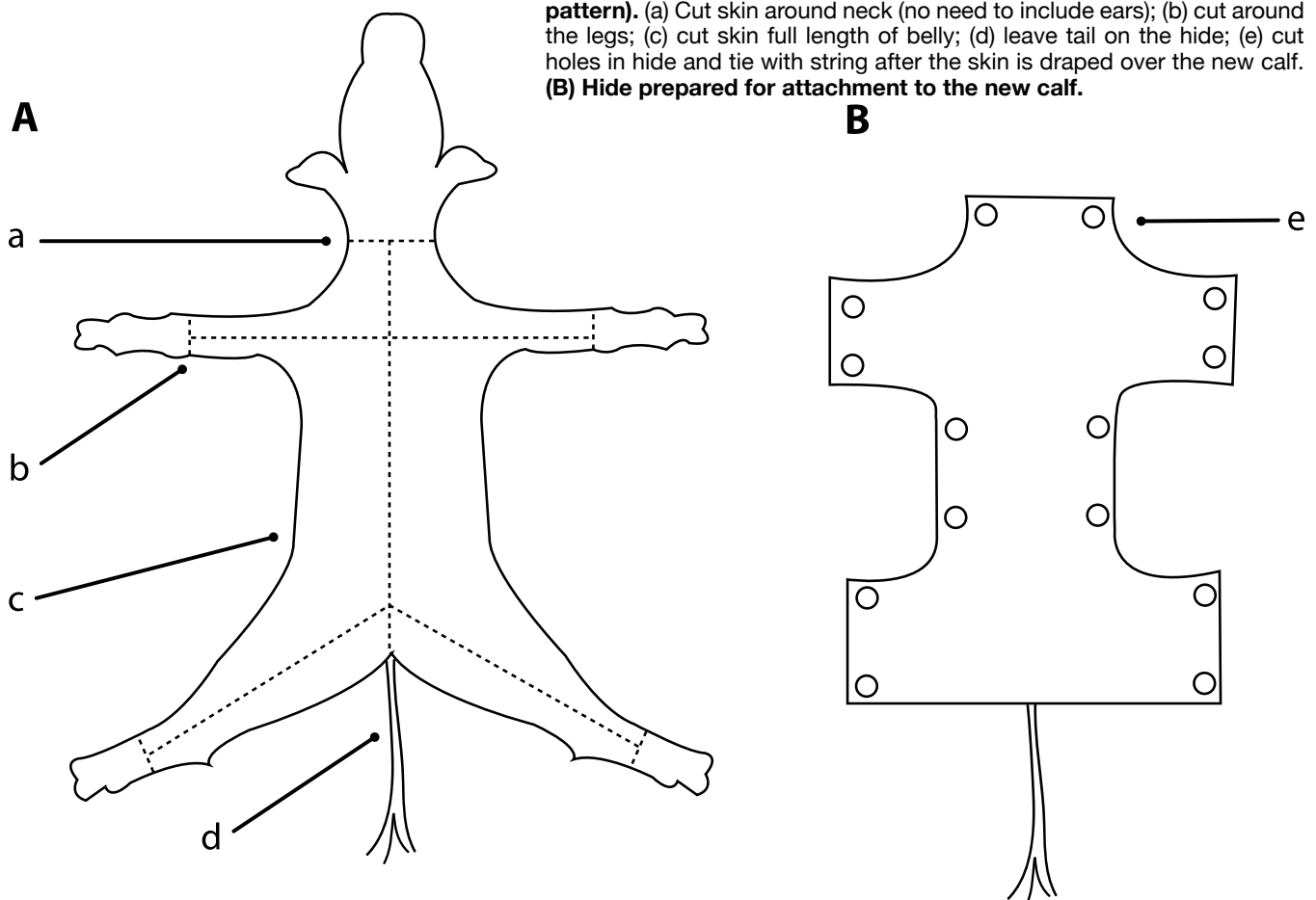
Several methods may be used for an effective and successful graft:

Skinning—Skinning is accomplished by removing the hide from a dead calf and applying it to the graft calf to lead the mother to believe the graft calf is hers. When skinning, only the skin over the back along with the tail needs to be used for an effective graft (Fig. 1).

The tail must be left on the hide, as this area will be the first that the cow will smell when introduced to the calf. The skin must be long enough to drape over the graft calf and be securely fastened.

Commercial Products—Several commercial products are available to aid in grafting calves. Commercial products generally consist of synthetic pheromones.

Fig. 1. (A) Deceased calf placed on its back (dashed lines denote hide cutting pattern). (a) Cut skin around neck (no need to include ears); (b) cut around the legs; (c) cut skin full length of belly; (d) leave tail on the hide; (e) cut holes in hide and tie with string after the skin is draped over the new calf. (B) Hide prepared for attachment to the new calf.



Afterbirth—Wiping or placing the afterbirth on the graft calf will produce the best results of all grafting methods. Use of the afterbirth on the calf results in familiarity of smell to the cow.

“Ranch Remedies”—Many ranchers have success with items that “out smart” the cow’s sense of smell. Colognes, mentholatum, etc., can be wiped on the cow’s nose and on the calf’s tail. The cow is lead to believe she smells her own calf.

Other remedies include use of honey or karo syrup poured on the back of the calf with grain sprinkled on top. With this con-coction, a cow will certainly begin accepting the calf.

Dogs—Occasionally, dogs can prove to be useful. Having a dog around the calf or corral may activate the cow’s protective nature.

Introduction to the Cow

Once a method has been selected, the calf must be prepared and introduced to the cow. Introduction of the calf is the most important strategy to ensure an effective graft. Always introduce the calf tail first to the mother. The tail is the first place a cow will smell on the calf. Therefore, use of afterbirth, pheromones, etc., must be around the tail and rump area.

If the calf is several days old, it may help to tie the legs so it remains lying down until the cow can become acquainted with it. If an older calf is too aggressive immediately, it may decrease the cow’s acceptance of it.

When introducing a graft calf, an enclosed area with escape routes is essential. Prepare to spend time observing the cow and calf to avoid injury to the calf.

If the cow won’t accept the calf and let nursing take place, it may be necessary to restrain her. Methods of restraint may include the use of a head catch, halter (to tie cow), hobbles, and soft cotton rope.

Restraint methods can be stressful to both cow and calf and the handler. If restraint becomes necessary, introduce the calf to the cow two or three times a day. Give the cow the opportunity to accept the calf without restraint each period of introduction. Eventually, grafting will be successful.

Cautions

Calves purchased from auctions or other off-farm sources may carry scours, pneumonia, Johne’s disease, or other diseases/infections and can infect your herd. Quarantining the new calf for a few days would help prevent the spread of any potential disease. The cow-calf interaction must be monitored closely so the calf isn’t

abused by the cow should she not accept the calf. When grafting newborn calves, remember that they must have a source of colostrum to provide immunity.

Tips for Success

A successful graft takes time and perseverance. To aid the grafting process, several criteria should be met.

1. The introduction should take place when the calf is hungry. The hunger mode will motivate the calf to keep trying to nurse.
2. The calf needs to be healthy and able to stand. The calf should have the ability to nurse.
3. If the cow is slightly tight-bagged, she will be more apt to let the calf suck to relieve pressure on the mammary system.

The production level of the cow should also be considered. If an older calf is grafted on a newly freshened cow, the calf will have a higher nutritional requirement than what the cow can support. The calf’s development will slow down unless supplements are provided until milk production increases.

Supplementation can decrease the success of the graft because the calf becomes used to a bottle. If a young calf is grafted to a cow in peak milk production, the risk of the calf contracting milk scours increases. The cow will have more milk than the calf can consume.

Sources of Calves

The best source for graft calves is your own operation. Every producer knows what disease problems have occurred and what their vaccination and herd management practices are. If this isn’t possible, a producer may contact another beef operation or a reputable dairy operation.

The local auction can also be a source for calves. When purchasing a calf, ask the following questions:

- Did the calf get an adequate amount of colostrum?
- What vaccinations and vitamin shots has the calf had?
- What is the health record of the calf?
- Does the calf have healthy vital signs?
- What was the calf’s birth date?
- If you purchase a bull calf, has it been banded?
- If you purchase a heifer calf, you must know if it was a twin and the birth weight.

Conclusion

Grafting calves can save producers time and money. It is much more cost effective to graft a calf rather than bottle-feed a calf. Grafting will take time and patience but will show returns once a successful graft takes place.

