

Title: Weighing the Pros and Cons: Castrating Male Calves Before Marketing

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It's that time of year when spring cow work is underway. For many operations, castrating male calves—particularly F1s, and even purebreds that don't meet bull criteria—is standard protocol. But it's always a conversation: *When should I castrate? Will it add value? Do I have the labor and facilities to get it done right?*

When it comes to raising and marketing calves, one of the age-old discussions among cattle producers is whether to castrate male calves before they head to market. It's a decision that impacts everything from animal handling to sale value, and like most things in this business, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. As with any management practice, it comes down to weighing the pros and cons and making the decision that fits your program and marketing goals.

The Case for Castration

Castrating male calves prior to sale has long been considered best practice—and for good reason. Steers are easier to manage. They're typically less aggressive, which results in fewer injuries in pens, during transport, or at the sale barn. That calmer disposition benefits not only the cattle but also the folks working them.

From a marketing standpoint, steers are generally preferred by buyers. Most stocker and feedlot operations are set up for steers, and intact bulls—especially those weaned or older—often face significant discounts due to concerns over fighting, mounting, and handling challenges. Castrated calves also tend to grade better in the feedlot, leading to a more consistent and desirable end product—which helps build a strong reputation for your program.

The Potential Downsides

Of course, castration isn't without its drawbacks. If it's delayed too long, it can result in stress, reduced gain, and short-term setbacks. Timing is critical: castrating calves early—ideally within the first few months—minimizes impact and allows them to bounce back quickly and keep on growing.

Some will argue that leaving bulls intact can result in slightly faster growth rates and heavier weaning weights. While that may be true in some cases, those advantages are often outweighed by the marketing penalties and added management risks.

Finding the Balance

Ultimately, the decision to castrate should align with your marketing plan. If you're targeting buyers who want calves ready for backgrounding or feedlot entry, castrated steers almost always

command stronger interest and a better premium. If you're selling at weaning and have consistent buyers willing to take on bulls, there may be some flexibility—but that's a much smaller, more specific segment of the market.

Consistency, communication, and knowing your buyer base are key. Buyers want cattle that are predictable, manageable, and ready to go to work. Taking time on the front end—whether it's castrating early, managing herd health, or preparing calves for transition—often leads to stronger demand and better prices when sale day rolls around.

It may seem like common sense or a decision that everyone has figured out, but the truth is, we're always seeing new people enter the business. Management practices vary widely from region to region and from operation to operation. At ABBA, and through the F1 Advantage program, we're committed to helping producers not only raise high-quality calves but also capture the full value of their work.

Thoughtful, well-timed decisions—like whether and when to castrate—continue to be part of what separates average cattle from great cattle in today's market.