



## **Castrating and dehorning cattle**

One of the fundamental organic principles is the need to ensure the highest possible standards for organic livestock and farmers are after all the nation's original champions of animal welfare.

It is imperative that all organic cattle be castrated and dehorned. It is recommended that calves are castrated as early as possible which is easier for all involved, calf, vet and farmer. Castrating is a practice that has been done on cattle for hundreds of years and is the oldest surgical operation known. It is done either by banding, using a burdizzo or cutting. A 3 - 4 day old calf hardly behaves any differently immediately after castration and there is very little bleeding. The benefits of early castration are proven. There is reduced aggressiveness and sexual activity by lowering testosterone levels. There is a decreased number of "dark cutting" beef due to high muscle PH caused by stress prior to slaughter and a higher quality grade, more consistent, marbled and tender meat is produced. Steers command higher prices at point of sale.

Dehorning or "disbudding" involves destroying the horn-producing cells of the horn bud and can be done by chemical and hot iron methods. It has been shown that disbudding young calves using anaesthetic before they reach 3 weeks of age is the least painful time as the horn buds are not yet attached to the skull. There are many arguments for doing so. There is a reduced risk of injury and bruising within the herd and subsequent financial loss if carcasses are damaged. A price advantage is gained by offering hornless cattle at point of sale. On-farm safety is paramount for animals, producers and employees so by dehorning younger calves the aggressive behavior at feeding time is reduced.

There is no question that these procedures need to be done so it is left to producers to think through the healing process after castrating and dehorning and tailor these considerations to their particular situation. Ensuring the animal has protection from extreme weather, bullying, that it has a warm, dry comfortable place to recover and that high quality food and water are available is key. Factors such as these will set the animal up for a swift and successful recovery.

Rachel Cooke  
OLMC / Peter Jones Livestock Ltd

