

The Facts about Optaflexx™: Ractopamine for Cattle

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As competition increases at junior livestock shows, many exhibitors look for ways to gain an “extra edge” in the show ring. Today, many commercial nutritional products are available that contain combinations of vitamins, minerals, probiotics, or fat to help improve the nutritional status of steers or heifers. While these products may help move an exhibitor towards the top of the class, they cannot take the place of good genetics, proper management and care.

On January 28, 2004, Elanco Animal Health™ made Optaflexx™ commercially available. Optaflexx™ is a medicated feed additive and is labeled only for use in steers or market heifers during their last 28 to 42 days on feed. It is not approved for use in breeding heifers or bulls. Optaflexx's™ active ingredient is ractopamine hydrochloride, which is the same compound found in Paylean®, labeled for use only in swine.

When considering using a feed additive such as Optaflexx™, one must remember that the foundation of any livestock project begins with selecting a high quality animal. Next, the exhibitor must choose a high quality feed that meets the basic nutritional needs of the calf. Finally, the amount of time and effort an exhibitor invests in his steer or heifer ultimately determines the success of their project.

Optaflexx™ will not turn an average calf into a champion, but it may help improve an animal's performance and slightly increase their muscle conformation. In research trials, Optaflexx™ increased rate of weight gain, improved feed efficiency, increased ribeye area, and increased red meat yield in cattle fed in confinement. Researchers also noticed a slight increase in muscle conformation in the sirloin and round. Since the product takes action at the cellular level, it does not affect the animal's hormonal status and is not considered a steroid.

The following information answers many common questions about feeding Optaflexx™ to show cattle. (Adapted from educational materials by Elanco Animal Health™)

- **How does Optaflexx™ work?** As the animal reaches maturity, Optaflexx™ redirects nutrients that would have become fat and synthesizes them into protein. The protein is synthesized and is used to increase muscle fiber size, which helps increase lean meat yield.
- **How will Optaflexx™ affect the performance of my steer?** Steers fed Optaflexx™ during the last 28-42 days of the feeding period gained 10 to 20 more pounds and had improved feed efficiency of 14 to 21 percent.
- **How will Optaflexx™ affect the carcass of my steer?** In research trials, Optaflexx™ increased ribeye area by up to ½ inch, but it did not affect backfat thickness, marbling score or quality grade.
- **Are there any negative effects of Optaflexx™ on my steer?** Researchers have not observed any negative effects on animal conformation. However, in cattle with skeletal problems (post legged, straight fronted), the added muscle mass could intensify these problems.
- **Why is Optaflexx™ labeled for use late in the feeding period?** As cattle begin to mature they tend to deposit more fat and less muscle. The active ingredient in Optaflexx™ changes this – it increases muscle growth and reduces fat deposition during the last 28-42 days of the finishing period. Young growing cattle will not respond to Optaflexx™ because most of their nutrients are already directed to protein/muscle synthesis rather than fat synthesis. More importantly, feeding young cattle Optaflexx™ is off-label and illegal.

•**Why is Optaflexx™ not labeled to be fed for more than 42 days?** Research shows that the effect of Optaflexx™ decreases rapidly after the first 35 days of feeding. After this, performance returns to the level prior to using Optaflexx™ and the body essentially becomes desensitized to the active ingredients in Optaflexx™. Remember, it is illegal to feed a product longer than what is stated on the product label.

•**What happens to my market steer or market heifer when I stop feeding Optaflexx™?**

Approximately 4 to 8 days after removing Optaflexx™ from the animal's diet, performance begins to return to the level prior to using the product. The animal will begin to shift to fat synthesis rather than muscle synthesis.

•**Can I feed more than the recommended dosage?**

No, this is off label use and is illegal. More is not better when feeding Optaflexx™! Research trials have shown that feeding Optaflexx™ at higher levels shows little or no effect on animal performance or muscle deposition.

•**What is the withdrawal period of Optaflexx™?**

There is no withdrawal period.

•**Can I also use Optaflexx™ in my pigs, lambs, goats, etc.?** NO! Optaflexx™ is approved by the FDA only for use in cattle. Any use in species other than cattle is illegal.

•**Is Paylean® different than Optaflexx™?** Yes!

Paylean® is labeled for use in swine and Optaflexx™ is labeled for use in cattle. Both contain ractopamine hydrochloride but at much different concentrations. Remember it is illegal to feed either product to species other than what is listed on the label.

•**Can I feed my breeding heifer or bull**

Optaflexx™? NO! The product is not approved for use in breeding animals, which would make its use off label and illegal. Studies have not been conducted to determine the effect Optaflexx™ may have on reproduction.

*All medicated feed additives are to be used in accordance with the FDA approved label. Extra-label use of medicated feed additives is strictly prohibited by federal law and no one has the authority to adjust the dose as labeled, including veterinarians.

For additional questions please feel free to contact Dr. Jason Cleere, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist at (903) 834-6191 or jjcleere@ag.tamu.edu. Additional information is also available from Elanco Animal Health™ at 1-800-428-4441.

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