

Early Weaning Considerations

Submitted by: David Kehler, County Extension Director/Agriculture Agent

Provided by: Larry C. Hollis, D.V.M., M.Ag.

Early weaning is a management practice that was used in response to the short forage supplies that was caused by the drought. There were many benefits that were discovered when early weaning was utilized.

If it fits into your management plans, early weaning calves should be considered. Considerable research has shown that it is a much better use of resources to wean the calf early, and either sell or feed the calf, than try to feed the cow enough to sustain lactation through a drought and hold feed costs down both now and this winter when producers are trying to get cows in condition to (1) survive the winter, (2) calve successfully, and (3) be in reasonable body condition score (BCS) to breed back next year

When consider early weaning, several other things need to be considered:

Water. Freshly weaned calves need plenty of fresh, clean water. Hopefully they have had access to water alongside their mothers, but if their mothers are drinking from an elevated tank or tub that calves cannot reach, they may need to be provided with a readily-available, closer-to-the-ground water source so that they are trained to drink from it prior to actual weaning time.

Weaning method. Research has shown that “soft” weaning methods such as fence line weaning weaning results in better maintenance of existing calf weights or subsequent calf performance than traditional weaning methods. When calves are weaned with a soft method, calves have the benefit of knowing their way around the pasture, including where shade, water and feed are located. Hard weaning methods always result in greater calf weight losses than soft methods. Also, hard weaning, especially when calves are weaned in dry, dusty pens, almost always results in more respiratory health problems.

Vaccination program. If some of the better calves need to be held for replacements, or calves are typically marketed through a value-added preconditioning program or marketing system, they will benefit from the same preconditioning and vaccination program that would be utilized if they were held until normal fall weaning time. Feeding programs following weaning need to be adjusted to meet the needs of these lighter calves. When processing calves during the heat, be careful to make sure that vaccines are handled properly, because heat can spoil vaccines rapidly if they are not kept refrigerated during transit and chuteside while working calves. If modified live virus vaccines are used, it is imperative that they also be protected from sunlight. Over 60% of viral particles in the bottle or syringe will be inactivated by only 1 hour of exposure to sunlight. Keeping the vaccine bottles and syringes in a cooler except when animals are actually being injected will help protect the product from both heat and sunlight.

We can't escape an occasional drought, but we can manage our way around them and reduce their negative impact. With a little advanced planning, early weaning can be accomplished and the herd set up to recover more quickly once it finally starts raining again!