

Management, health, and nutritional considerations for weaning calves

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Weaning time can be a stressful time for calves. Weaning calves at home and selling after the seasonal price pressure subsides can increase profitability. Reducing separation and handling stress, providing proper nutrition, and preconditioning against disease increases the value of the calves and improves their performance when they enter the growing and finishing period.

CALF HEALTH & OTHER PROCEDURES AT WEANING

Using low-stress handling techniques to ease calves away from their mothers boosts the vaccinations calves were given before bull turnout. Calves are very susceptible to parasites and an effective dewormer should be given as well. A growth implant approved for weaning calves will improve growth during the next 45 to 60 days post weaning for cattle not intended for replacement breeding stock.

METHODS OF SEPARATION

Separating calves from their dams causes behavioral changes that lead to stress. Vocalization, walking fences, and reduced intake can all result in reduced performance and health concerns. Producers should choose the separation method that works best for their operation.

- **TRADITIONAL WEANING**- Traditional weaning is defined as separating the cows and calves abruptly without any residual contact. Calves may be moved away from the ranch, or they may be confined to a dry lot or a small pasture while the cows are taken away from the immediate area. Traditional weaning results in vocalization and fence walking which can last up to 3 days.
- **FENCELINE WEANING** – Fenceline weaning (placing cows and calves on opposite sides of a fence) has been shown to result in fewer vocalizations, less fence walking, and more weight gain postweaning compared to traditional weaning of calves. Fenceline weaning works best using a tight, 4-5 strand barbwire fence, reinforced with woven wire or electric fence. However, successful fenceline weaning has been accomplished with two strands of electric fence. One key to successful fenceline weaning is ensuring the adjacent pastures share a fence long enough for the cows and calves to spread out and maintain relatively close physical proximity. The process takes about 5-7 days. Fenceline weaning is best accomplished by removing cows from the pasture the pairs were occupying rather than moving the calves to a new pasture because the calves are accustomed to the watering location and feeding facilities. If calves are going to be supplemented, consider supplementing the pairs three days a week beginning about three weeks before weaning.

NUTRITION

Nutrition is a key element in the weight gain and immune response of weaned calves. Milk is rich in energy, protein, and vitamins and minerals and needs to be replaced with high quality forage and possibly supplement to maintain preweaning nutrient intake. Unlimited access to fresh, clean water is essential for weaned calves. If the post weaning water source is unfamiliar to the calves, make accommodations to familiarize the calves.

- **WEANING ON GRASS** - Native range in the fall is in a state of declining nutrient content. Weaned calves grazing native range in the fall may require supplemental feed depending on the targeted weight gain.
- **WEANING IN DRY LOT** – Calves moving from grazing to dry lot for weaning must learn to eat from a bunk. Bunk space needs to be adequate (1.5 – 2 ft/hd) for the number of calves being weaned. Maintaining feed intake is crucial. Feeding long stem high quality grass hay the first two or three days post-weaning, works well to start calves on feed. After two or three days, begin adding some energy feeds to the diet. The diet can be delivered as a total mixed ration or the energy feed can be top-dressed on the hay. Fermented feeds such as silage should be avoided until calves are eating well, as it is not highly palatable to them. Additionally, energy is important but energy sources high in starch such as corn should be limited to 50% or less of the dietary dry matter.