

“Early Weaning”

This topic may be the most difficult to come to grips with as a beef producer. But this year has been tremendously taxing in parts of east central Kansas. Parts of our Extension District have had good rainfall while others have been dreadfully dry. If your pastures have dried up and you are feeding hay, early weaning may be something to consider.

Early weaning means weaning calves at much lighter weights, thus you should consider a change in management, extra planning, perhaps additional facilities, feedstuffs, health concerns, etc. Early weaning is beneficial to the cow and to the pasture. It reduces the cows nutrient demand and thus reduces the amount of forage she needs to consume. When forages are limited, a nursing calf draws the body condition of the cow down. Early weaning allows the cow to dry off and use the available forage and additional supplementation to improve her body condition. Weaning now, gives us plenty of time to re-gain body condition prior to spring calving.

If your calves are at least 90-100 days of age, they can be removed from the cow and survive---even thrive---in a feedlot environment. If facilities and feedstuffs are available calves can be cost-effectively grown to a similar weight as would be expected during a “normal” weaning situation. At that time the calves can be sold or be retained through the fall and sold as feeders in the spring.

One common concern is that of immune function of the calves. The health of early-weaned calves is at least equal to their normal-weaned counterparts, and in some cases may actually be improved due to residual circulating maternal antibodies from colostrum and the improved weather conditions during summer vs. during a cold, wet, fall. Granted, weaning during extremely hot, dusty conditions can also contribute to stress and health challenges, but the risk is no greater than during normal fall weaning. Proper preparation of the calves prior to weaning can minimize some of the risk. Consider:

1. Pre-conditioning vaccination and worming. A 2-3 weeks prior to weaning, give the calves a booster vaccination for blackleg, respiratory issues and deworm.
2. If you have started feeding hay, bring cows into your weaning lot and feed hay at that location. This will let the calves become accustom to the lot and to eating dry hay. Also, you may want to feed a couple pounds of your weaning ration or creep feed to each cow, be sure you have enough bunk space to allow the calves to acclimate to the grain diet and eat along side of the cows. (Research shows, calves that have previously eaten out of a bunk are much more likely to eat out of the bunk than those that have never experienced eating from a bunk.)
3. Calves often walk the fence when first weaned. Place portable feed bunks along the fenceline. I prefer putting them at 90 degree angles to the fence so the calves have to walk around them, this seems to help them find the feed.
4. “Soft” weaning should also be considered. This can be accomplished by either (1) use of nose clips which prevent the calf from nursing, or (2) by fence line weaning where cows and calves may continue nose-to-nose contact but the calf cannot nurse. Soft weaning eliminates the added stress of abrupt and complete separation.
5. If dust is a concern, and you are planning to do across the fence weaning you may want to run a lawn sprinkler to wet an area along the fenceline between the cows and calves to reduce the risk of respiratory problems.

If there were ever a situation where “thinking outside the box” was required, it may be this summer.