

Weaning Strategies



"Weaning the cows" may offer less a stressful alternative.

by Troy Smith

PHOTOS BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

► Cow-calf producers have sought alternatives to the tradition of penning the calves and trying to keep the cows beyond sight, sound and smell of their bawling babies. The best way to wean varies by operation, depending on feed resources, facilities, marketing goals and time constraints.

Fall is a season that inspires mixed emotions among agrarian Americans. Cooler temperatures offer respite from summer heat but foretell winter's frigid advance. Long evenings are cozy by the fire, but it's still too dark when the morning alarm clock rings. Traditionally, fall is a time for celebrating the harvest, but it's also the time to wean those spring-born calves.

Now there's a chore that inspires dread among cattlemen. Weaning can be an ordeal fraught with anxiety for all parties involved. Certainly it's stressful for calves and cows, but weaning time can be a strain on the humans involved with the process. It can tax their emotions, test their resolve, and threaten relationships among cattle owners, managers, employees, family members and neighbors.

If you are a producer or associate with cattle folk, you've experienced or heard about weaning gone sour. Aside from the actual task of splitting pairs, the trouble usually occurs in the days or weeks that follow. Bawling calves traipse up and down the fencelines, stirring up clouds of dust. The days are warm, but nights are cold, and calves have snotty noses. Some of those calves won't even look at a feedbunk.

In the night, the bunch spooks, breaks through the fence and scatters, thus dictating the next day's work schedule. Or a neighbor calls to report that the cows you drove to your farthest pasture just trotted past his place on their way back to the calf pens. On their way by, your cows set off the neighbor's freshly weaned calves, and they found a weak spot in the fence. It's time to saddle up and ride!

Consider alternatives

To lessen the trauma and likelihood of sick calves, not to mention the managerial migraines, many cow-calf producers have sought alternatives to what probably is the most traditional weaning method — penning the calves and trying to keep the cows beyond sight, sound and smell of those bawling babies.

There is no "best" way to wean since feed resources, facilities, marketing goals and time constraints vary among farms and ranches. However, when trying to tailor a procedure that suits your operation, it might help to learn what works for others.

Common is the concept whereby calves are weaned in familiar surroundings with familiar feed. Nebraska cattleman Larry Estes calls it "weaning the cows," rather than

the calves. Estes and his father, Bill, manage about 300 commercial Angus cows in northern Custer County, grazing native range in the summer and crop residues during the winter. Weaning is scheduled between the two, usually around the first of November, when cornstalks become available. The first step, however, is moving the pairs to a trap near the corrals.

"There's a little forage to graze, and we bunk-feed silage and hay to the pairs. After several days, the calves feel at home, and their mothers have shown them how to eat from the bunks," Estes explains. "Then we shut up the cows and feed them in the corrals until the bawling stops."

Estes says it's the cows that make most of the noise. The calves make little fuss and seem content in their familiar surroundings. In three or four

days, the cows are hauled away to stalk fields.

Wean on pasture

Like Estes, Iowa State University (ISU) research supervisor Dennis Maxwell has found that calves can be weaned with little stress, even when the cows are just across the fence and bawling their heads off. At the McNay Research and Demonstration Farm, however, the calves are weaned on pasture without supplemental feed.

"I'll admit I was apprehensive when we first tried pasture weaning five or six years ago. Now I really like it," Maxwell says. "We've found the key is having a clean and green environment — ample forage that's highly palatable."

Even with the cows making some ruckus in nearby pens, Maxwell says the calves bury their noses in the good grass and eat like kids in a candy store. And these are relatively young calves weaned at 150-170 days of age. After a few days in a relatively small pasture, where they can be checked easily, the calves are moved to another, larger pasture. Strip grazing is employed to optimize utilization of fresh forage.

"On pasture, calves will gain 1 to 1½ pounds (lb.) per day, more if they're supplemented," Maxwell adds. "Calves weaned in a feedlot gain faster once they're eating feed well. But right from the start, our pasture-weaned calves are just more at ease."

After attending a McNay Farm field day five years ago, Jim Werner and some of his neighbors decided to try pasture weaning. Werner, an Angus breeder from Diagonal, Iowa, consolidates his herd in a weaning pasture, and as soon as the cattle settle down, the cows are pulled out. Most are hauled away, but some are penned nearby.

"Even with some cows within sight and sound, the calves are pretty content in a pasture that has a single electric wire on three sides," Werner says. "If the grass is of good quality and quantity, we don't try to feed anything

extra for two to three weeks. Calves usually gain about 1¾ pounds per day on just grass. If it's a year when the grass isn't so good, we put bunks out sooner and introduce some feed."

About a month after weaning, Werner sorts bull calves into a growing pen. Heifers stay on pasture with supplemental feed.

"There might be better ways to do it, but we're satisfied with our weaning program. We wean calves early (130-150 days of age) so the cows don't lose condition in the fall. It's a more efficient use of resources to feed the calf directly, rather than trying to do it through the cow. And we don't have as much sickness in the calves."

Health benefits

At the University of Nebraska Gudmundsen Ranch, beef specialist Don Adams credits the current weaning strategy for reducing health problems among weaned calves. Due to his penchant for holding down total cow maintenance costs, Adams says he was skeptical when pasture weaning first was adopted.

"I didn't like the idea of locking up the cows and feeding them hay, thinking they ought to be harvesting forage themselves. But I've come to believe it is worth the investment. Weaning is easier, and we don't treat many sick calves," he explains.

For the March-calving herd, weaning takes place in mid- to late September, when pairs are corralled overnight. The next day, calves are pulled and turned onto subirrigated meadows. After three days in confinement, the cows are driven to pastures located five or six miles away.

The meadows typically provide quality forage for calves to graze throughout October and November. Four to six weeks after turnout, bunks are placed along the edge of a meadow so the calves can be started on a pelleted feed supplement.

"It works. Very seldom do we have cows or calves try to travel. Calves do just as well grazing as when they are left on the cows,

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► Provide a quality feed with which calves are familiar.



► For an easier wean, make sure calves have ready access to clean water and quality feed. It helps if calves are accustomed to the type of water source (tank, automatic fountain, etc.) and the first feed they will receive.

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and we don't have much trouble getting them started at the bunks. And we're getting the calves off before they start pulling down cow condition," Adams says. "I really like weaning this way in the fall, but it works about as well in January when we wean calves from our June-calving cows."

Fenceline contact

Colorado's Kit Pharo favors pasture weaning, too, but the Cheyenne Wells rancher hates to hear a lot of bawling from calves or cows. For the last seven years, he has tried to minimize stress for both through across-the-fence weaning. The method allows cows and calves to have some contact with one another, across a good hot-wire fence, for a few days.

Pharo says pairs divided by the fence will find one another and sniff noses. When their anxiety subsides, both cow and calf will start to graze. Shortly, the cow will return to the fence and summon her calf. After a little more sniffing, each will venture out again to graze. Intermittent visits to the fence will continue but will become less frequent as the bond between cow and calf weakens.

"We often see cows and their calves lying down on opposite sides of the fence, happily chewing their cud. Pretty soon, they're out grazing again. After a couple of days, though, fewer and fewer cows will come back to the fence. They aren't concerned about their calves, and the calves are learning they don't need their mothers anymore," Pharo says.

"After three or four days, we move the cows away," he continues. "They're usually so excited about going to fresh pasture that all we have to do is open the gates ahead of them. Hardly any will look back even once."

Age options

According to Colorado State University Extension beef specialist Jack Whittier, some

producers also might want to consider alternatives for *when* to apply their chosen weaning strategy. The weaning age of 205 days was chosen for early-day performance studies and became the industry standard, but Whittier says it's really an arbitrary standard based more on tradition than science.

"Calves as young as 150 days of age can be weaned nicely, so other factors deserve consideration. Producers worry about weather stress, and wide temperature fluctuations in October and November really challenge calves already stressed by weaning. The more-narrow temperature ranges of September make a good argument for earlier weaning," Whittier says, adding that cow condition should be a high priority, too. "If the cows are getting thin, it might be time to wean the calves and let the cows bounce back."

Whittier says the choice and timing of a weaning strategy must fit each operation's resources, including feed, facilities and labor, as well as the producer's marketing goals. He believes a commonsense approach to weaning includes measures to minimize stress.

Recommendations include making sure calves have ready access to clean water and quality feed. It helps if calves already are accustomed to the type of water source (tank, automatic fountain, etc.) and the first feed they will receive.

Weaning on grass offers the stress-relieving advantages provided by familiar feed and a familiar, dust-free environment. In a pen-weaning situation, bunks can be placed in a manner to inhibit the fence walking that stirs up anxiety, as well as dust, but also so that calves can't help but find their feed.

Prevaccination of calves two to four weeks ahead of weaning is the practice most often recommended to complement any weaning strategy.



PHOTO BY CHRISTY COUCH

Positive role model

If pasture weaning isn't an option and calves must be confined and bunk-fed, it's always gratifying to see them lined up at the bunk and eating. But calves often undergo a period of depressed feed intake during the first two weeks after weaning. This depression in consumption and its accompanying stress occur at the same time calves need to mount an immune response to several pathogenic organisms.

To encourage calves to eat, thus reducing stress, Ohio State University (OSU) animal scientists have provided calves with positive role models.

According to OSU researcher Steven Loerch, suckling calves are reared in a hierarchical society, with the brood cow's being the dominant figure. The cow teaches her calf how to eat and where to find water, and she serves as a protector.

The social order disintegrates when calves are weaned and placed in a new environment where feed and water sources are foreign. However, Loerch says, dry, open cows can be used as trainer animals to teach calves how to eat from a bunk and to drink from a waterer.

In a study of the effects of trainer animals on the eating behavior of newly weaned calves, dry cows were used as training animals for some groups and older, already-weaned steers were used as trainers for other pens. Loerch observed that more calves from groups penned with trainer animals came to the bunk sooner and ate more frequently than did control-group calves without trainers.

However, the greatest percentage of calves became sick in the pens containing trainer steers. Loerch blames that on the fact that several trainer steers became sick following introduction of the freshly weaned calves. He believes trainer cows have greater potential for exerting a positive influence on feed intake and health. Furthermore, the experience can be positive for the cows, too.

If they are somewhat thin and probably won't weigh up many dollars on a cow market that usually trends lower in the fall, open cows can make ideal trainers. Due to their condition, efficiency of gain may be excellent for those animals when fed a feedlot receiving diet. So, Loerch says, using open cows to train calves at weaning, while subjecting the cows to a short-term feeding program prior to marketing, is worth consideration.