



Vet Call

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Weaning options

Weaning is considered a stressful event for calves and can affect health and weight gain. The timing and method of weaning can influence a number of important considerations on a ranch, including calf health, amount of weight sold, amount of purchased forage and feed needed to support the cow herd, pasture management, timing and amount of labor required, postweaning growth performance and efficiency, and carcass characteristics.

Advantages, disadvantages

A number of research experiments and reports from ranchers have indicated that, at least in some situations, weaning calves earlier than at the traditional 6-8 months of age can be used to improve labor use, calf health, calf distress, pasture management and feed costs. Ranchers commonly early-wean calves at 4-5 months of age; and producers can wean calves as early as 6 weeks to 2 months of age in some situations.

Early weaning can be used to manage pastures and reduce feed costs during periods of drought, overgrazing or other causes of limited grazable forage. This is because milk production requires a lot of energy and protein, and removing those demands is one way to keep cows in good body condition during periods of limited or expensive feed. Some studies have indicated stopping lactation and removing calves from a pasture will reduce the amount of forage consumed off the pasture by as much as 50%.

Some of the disadvantages of early weaning can include a change in the timing of labor use and the need for a separate pasture or feeding facility for the calves. Although early weaning is often reported to not increase the risk of health problems, weaning younger, lighter animals requires that the producer and veterinarian re-evaluate the health program.

For example, castration and dehorning should be done at least two weeks (and preferably earlier) prior to weaning, and because weaning is moved, getting these activities done early in the calves' lives can require a change in when cattle are handled.

The supplement or complete ration required by young calves can be somewhat different than that of older calves, and someone with nutritional expertise should evaluate the nutrition plan for early-weaned calves. In general, young calves require a higher-calorie and higher-protein diet than older calves. Adequate feed intake is necessary to successfully wean calves early;

therefore, young calves must like the taste of the feeds and the forages used.

Fenceline weaning

Traditionally, weaning involves both removing milk from the diet of suckling calves and removing social contact between the calf and dam. Some producers use fenceline weaning so that while milk is removed from the diet, the social contact between the calf and cow is maintained.

The fence used to separate cows and calves can range from pipe and panels to two strands of electric or polywire fence. A report from California researchers compared three years of fenceline weaning to traditional weaning, either taking calves to a separate pasture or to a drylot.

Researchers reported that fenceline contact of newly weaned calves with their dams is less stressful and results in more weight gain than weaning methods where calves and their dams are separated by distance. The fenceline-weaned calves walked less and ate and laid down more than the other groups of weaned calves, particularly during the first three days postweaning. Fenceline-weaned calves gained more weight during the first two weeks postweaning, and this advantage was still present 10 weeks postweaning.

The California researchers observed that fenceline-weaned calves tended to spend about 60% of their time within 10 feet of the fence separating them from their dams during the first two days following weaning, but they traveled farther away from the separating fence each day until the calves failed to consistently return to the fence. The calves were relatively independent of their dams after four or five days.

Similar behavior was exhibited by the cows.

If weaned calves are going to be moved to a feedlot situation fairly soon after weaning, calves weaned in a pasture can be "bunk-broke," or trained to eat from a feedbunk, by placing a portable feedbunk in the pasture and supplying a grain-based supplement. Exposing calves on pasture to both a feedbunk and a water trough prior to being moved to a drylot will improve the health and performance of those cattle in their next environment.

Producers can use the timing and method of weaning to manage forage use, cow body condition, labor needs and calf health. Depending on your situation, you may want to consider either early weaning or fenceline weaning to improve overall herd management on your ranch.

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