

Consider Early Weaning

Weaning at 60 to 150 days of age can be beneficial for calves, cows.

by *Mary Lou Peter-Blecha*

With drought conditions stretching from Texas through Kansas and into the Dakotas, cow-calf producers are making decisions on how to protect pastures and maintain as much profitability as possible, said Sandy Johnson, Kansas State University (K-State) animal scientist.

“The delayed turnout and reduced stocking rate tactics that many used to make initial adjustments may have still overestimated pasture production based on the continued lack of rainfall and warm weather,” said Johnson, who is a livestock specialist with K-State Research and Extension. “In that case, one option that producers should consider is weaning earlier than normal.”

Given proper nutrition and management, weaning calves at 60 to 150 days of age has been beneficial for both calves and their dams, Johnson said. Research indicates a similar incidence of disease and death loss when comparing early and conventionally weaned calves.

Cow benefits

Advantages to early weaning include:

- ▶ a 25%-40% sparing of pasture depending on the stage of production at weaning;
- ▶ a 60% reduction in water requirement of the cow;
- ▶ maintenance or improvement in cow condition assuming adequate forage availability;
- ▶ increased odds of retaining the cow herd;
- ▶ lower costs to feed dry vs. lactating cows if drylot limit-feeding is needed; and
- ▶ similar to better carcass quality than conventionally weaned calves.

“Young cows would benefit most from early weaning, especially if it occurs prior to rebreeding and if poor cow condition might delay conception,” Johnson said. “There is generally a cost associated with allowing cows to become too thin, either in delayed or failed conception, feed cost to regain condition, or in lower sales receipts.”

Calf benefits

If calves are sold immediately, the total pounds sold will be reduced compared to a traditional weaning time, but the price slide on lightweight calves has been attractive, she said.

If calves are weaned and retained, a properly balanced diet designed for lightweight calves should be fed.

“Remember that the calf’s conversion efficiency is very good at this point — in the range of 3 to 5 pounds of dry matter for each pound of gain. The rumen of a 60-day-old calf is almost fully functional, so calves of this age and older can readily adapt to a dry feed diet,” Johnson said.

More information on nutrition for the early-weaned calf is in the July issue of the *BeefTips* newsletter, available at www.asi.ksu.edu/beeftips.

Because parts of the High Plains have experienced various degrees of drought the past four to six years, some producers initially used early weaning to relieve drought stress and have since continued because of unforeseen advantages, Johnson said. Early weaning is often used to reduce forage demand. However, once pastures return to good condition, stocking rates could be adjusted.



PHOTO BY MICKY WILSON

▶ “There is generally a cost associated with allowing cows to become too thin, either in delayed or failed conception, feed cost to regain condition, or in lower sales receipts,” says Sandy Johnson, K-State animal scientist.

For producers who retain ownership, early weaning can help ensure that calves are ready for the typical April peak in the fed-cattle market. If calves are more than 120 days of age at weaning, carcass weights are similar to conventionally weaned calves.

Early weaning protocol

Before starting an early weaning program, Johnson encourages producers to visit with their veterinarian to discuss any needed adaptations in health programs.

“If the cow vaccination program is strong and calves are young enough to still have passive immunity from colostrum, typical weaning vaccinations may be delayed until calves are older,” she said.

Producers have used various management techniques to minimize weaning stress. For example, one producer weans calves on irrigated forage with the cows in an adjacent pen. Feedbunks with dry feed are between the cows and the irrigated pasture, Johnson said.

Others start calves on creep feed prior to weaning.

“Many methods will work and, with some planning, producers should not be afraid to try early weaning,” she said.

More information is available at county and district K-State Research and Extension offices or by contacting Johnson at (785) 462-6281 or sandyj@ksu.edu.



Editor’s Note: *Mary Lou Peter-Blecha is news coordinator for K-State Research and Extension, which supplied this article.*