



# Weaning Wisdom

*Tried-and-true strategies that help ensure healthy, profitable calves at weaning.*

by **Kindra Gordon**

**W**eaning time brings cattle producers one-step closer to their paycheck for that calf crop — so they know how important it is to ensure calf health. Most producers agree that weaning success isn't about fancy techniques; it's simply about doing the basic management strategies right.

Nate Frederickson, who raises registered Hereford and Angus cattle near St. Onge, S.D., describes his approach to weaning as a three-legged stool encompassing a proper vaccination program,

appropriate nutrition and low stress cattle handling.

"These are pretty standard practices, but they work well. If you don't have one of the components or legs, that stool will not stand and the weaning program could fail," he says.

Frederickson, who also works as a sales representative for Novartis Animal Health, has had ample opportunity to see the value of vaccine programs. He recommends two rounds of shots — one at preconditioning and the other at or shortly after weaning. Frederickson tells, "Veterinarians differ on opinions whether it's better to vaccinate at weaning or

14 days later. As long as calves have had preconditioning shots either time works."

Frederickson recommends producers vaccinate with a standard five-way viral vaccine combined with a seven-way, *pasturella* and *H. Somnus*. But

he adds, "Operations can differ, so I highly recommend producers work closely with their veterinarian for a tailored weaning vaccination program."

With regard to nutrition for newly weaned calves, Frederickson puts emphasis on a mineral program but notes there can be some flexibility in the feedstuffs selected to fit each producer's gain goals. "Depending on the gain a producer wants for calves will dictate the nutritional needs — from hay or grass to a complete pellet," he says.

Last but not least, Frederickson always makes sure to keep stress on his newly weaned calves minimal. This includes providing weaned calves a clean pen or large paddock with grass and adequate fences combined with easy access to fresh water and feed. He adds, "A little TLC can go a long way when it comes to weaning."

Frederickson acknowledges that some of these steps take extra effort — and investment — to make sure that weaning goes smoothly, but it adds up to healthy calves that go on to perform and produce a profit. **HW**

## Additional tips

Low-stress handling and fenceline weaning can be valuable tools to help ensure calf health during the stressors of weaning time.

To reduce the risk of coccidiosis, the addition of an ionophore or amprolium into the calves' diet beginning at least a week prior to weaning and continuing for three weeks following weaning can be beneficial. By minimizing coccidia from stressing the calves' digestive and immune systems, the secondary infections of BRD are also minimized.

## Weaning time is not just about the calf

While weaning decisions mostly focus on the calf, Jason Ahola, Colorado State University associate professor of beef production systems, reminds producers that cow body condition score should also be a factor that helps determine the appropriate weaning time.

Ahola says, "Often, because we like the look of growing calves so much, the majority of beef cattle producers (53%), decide when to wean their calves primarily based on calf weight or age. Interestingly, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) survey data, only 7% of producers consider cow body condition score as the primary factor to determine weaning time."

He continues, "I'll be the first to admit it — it's not very appealing to look at young, small, and lightweight calves, never mind weaning them like that. We all love to see big, heavy calves at weaning time. But, numerous studies have demonstrated that weaning calves early can be an effective tool to help improve reproduction and forage availability by reducing nutrient requirements of the cows."

Ahola explains that a typical beef cow requires about 10 megacalories of energy per day to maintain her body tissues. When she is lactating, the same cow requires approximately three to six additional megacalories per day, depending on how many days she has been lactating.

When a calf is weaned earlier than normal, the cow's overall nutritional requirements are reduced when her lactation stops. Non-lactating cows require about 20-35% fewer nutrients than lactating ones. Ultimately, fewer nutrients required per cow mean more feed to go around for other more appropriate uses.



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Among researchers, it is generally agreed that weaning early can offer these advantages:

- Cows are able to improve their body condition scores prior to winter feeding.
- Reproductive performance can improve (as seen by more cows pregnant during the season and/or more cows pregnant earlier in the season) due to reduced nutritional demand and improved body condition scores.
- There will be greater forage availability for cows or other livestock, including reduced demand on pastures.
- Calf performance can be improved in drought situations, sometimes including more desirable carcass characteristics.

## Early weaning options

Typically, beef calves are weaned at about 6 or 7 months of age. However, researchers have reported that calves can be successfully weaned as young as 1.5 to 2 months of age.

Ahola explains that calves weaned prior to or during the breeding season (at 2 to 3 months of age) can have immediate effects on reproductive performance in that same year's breeding season, including changes to conception rate and length of postpartum interval. However, if calves are weaned one to three months earlier than normal, reproductive performance can only be affected in the next year's breeding season (due to elevated body condition scores at the end of the upcoming winter).

Ahola admits early weaning does have its downfalls compared to traditional weaning. For instance, in the short term, income will likely be reduced if calves are sold at a significantly lighter weight. But, he adds, "It should be noted that lighter calves commonly sell for a higher price per pound, and calf prices also tend to be higher in late summer versus fall. And, when viewed over the long term, more future calves will likely be born earlier in the calving season — assuming cows are in better condition and breed back sooner — and will be older and heavier at weaning time in subsequent years."

Early weaning also requires an increased focus on management and calf nutrition and possibly a need for improved animal facilities.

But, particularly in drought situations or with young cows, Ahola suggests it may be a management option worth considering. **HW**