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## GOOD WEANING MANAGEMENT

Kansas State Livestock Specialist Sandy Johnson says when you ask producers about weaning experiences you hear a variety of stories. The late night call from the sheriff looking for the owner of the black cows trotting down the highway; the favorite heifer calf that broke a leg getting out of the weaning pen; too much noise outside to carry on a conversation and enjoy the deck on a beautiful fall evening. Weaning beef calves can be stressful for calves, cows and people.

The magnitude of weaning as a stressor was emphasized by Dr Joe Stookey, PhD, Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, Canada. He pointed to the fact that cows and calves will bawl for days after weaning as evidence to support his belief that weaning is the most stressful experience in a calf's life. The survival instincts of cattle as prey animals would normally keep them from alerting predators of their whereabouts and to blend in with the herd. Weaning seems like such a threat to survival that the cow and calf will vocalize loudly for days ignoring the fact that it may draw predators. We know the calf will have all it needs to survive, but the calf doesn't know that yet.

Two methods have been researched recently to reduce the stress of weaning; fenceline weaning and two-stage weaning. Fenceline weaning separates cows and calves by a fenceline in a familiar pasture for several days before removing cows from the area. Two-stage weaning uses an anti-suckling device in place for 3 to 7 days prior to actually separating the cow/calf pair. Both methods reduce signs of behavioral stress by the calves as compared to traditional weaning. Walking and vocalization are particularly reduced with 2-stage weaning leading some to view it as the least stressful method. Fenceline weaned calves will still walk the fence for the first couple of days but not nearly as much as traditionally weaned calves. The dividing fence could be an electric wire, but it would be wise to use a hot and a ground so calves can't scoot under the wire.

Measurements of post-weaning gain indicate that fenceline weaned calves outgain traditionally weaned calves as far as 10 weeks after weaning whereas improvement in gain in 2-stage weaned calves was only apparent in the first 2 to 3 weeks after being removed from dams.

Reducing stress at weaning could involve shifting from traditional weaning to fenceline or 2-stage weaning.

Other steps to reduce stress at weaning –Ensure calves are prepared to respond to disease challenge by providing appropriate mineral nutrition and starting a vaccination program prior to weaning. Move cows and calves together at the weaning site for several days to allow cows to show calves the location of food and water, then divide by fenceline or in the traditional method remove the cows to a field or pasture well removed from the calves. Teach calves to eat by providing a creep feeder a month before weaning. Make sure pens and waterers are clean and in good repair. Evaluate pen size and bunk placement so that stopping and eating is easier to do than walking the fence.

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