

Good Weaning Management is Good for Animal Welfare and Your Bottom Line

Weaning time is a couple of months away but now is the time to begin to start planning for weaning your calves.

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 is stressful for calves, cows and people. Weaning is second only to calving for death losses.

The magnitude of weaning as a stressor was emphasized by Dr. Joe Stookey, PhD, Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, Canada at the International Symposium on Animal Welfare held in Manhattan in May. 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 the 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.

Measurements of postweaning 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. These methods won't fit all production settings but what might not have seemed possible at first glance may be when considered further. Weaning as a topic at an animal welfare program is indicative of the time we live in and gives us cause for reflection.

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. Calves should be worked and immunized at least three to four weeks before weaning. Have both cows and calves together at the weaning site to allow cows to show calves the location of food and water. 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.

Fenceline Weaning

Don't let your idea of fenceline weaning stop at cows in one existing pasture and calves in another. Many things will work. Consider fencing cows in a smaller area with supplemental feed and leaving the calves in the bulk of the pasture. In some cases working corrals have been used to hold cows with the calves outside the working area.

A wide range of fencing approaches have been used to separate cows and calves in fenceline weaning; electric and non-electric, barbed, woven and high-tensile. If cows and calves are already trained to an electric fence, a single hot wire with 3 strands of barbed wire may work fine. As with anything tried for the first time, anticipate the need for adjustment. Calves should be familiar with the pasture and location of water prior to fenceline weaning. More suggestions on fenceline weaning can be found in a bulletin by Wright and Pruitt at <http://agbiopubs.sdstate.edu/articles/ExEx2049.pdf>.

Two Stage Weaning

Anti-suckling devices should be in place for 3 to 7 days prior to weaning. If allowed to remain longer, some calves learn how flip the device up so they can still nurse. One study using an adjustable nose clip found those calves were eating less and spent more time idle than fenceline weaned or control calves. The authors speculated that there may have been more discomfort with this particular device as this effect was not reported in similar studies. Devices can be re-used but be sure to disinfect between uses. The disadvantages of this method include at least one additional handling and the distance between the pasture and the working area.

Is setting up for fenceline weaning or applying and removing the anti-suckling devices at a planned time better than treating sick calves on their schedule? Now is the time to be assessing current weaning practices and looking for ways of minimizing stress to improve calf health, performance and well being. It is also the time to be proactive in applying acceptable animal welfare techniques that also have positive production benefits for the producer.

Source: Sandy Johnson, livestock specialist, Kansas State University, July 2010 KSU Beef Tips

Management Questions to Consider

Are my weaning practices stressful on my calves?

How can I implement low stress weaning?

Do I use Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) practices at weaning?

Am I using acceptable animal welfare techniques with my cattle?