

Tips for bunk-breaking calves:

What's Your Strategy?

Removing stressors is key to successful bunk-breaking.

Story & photos by
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Weaning time isn't always a walk in the park, but training calves to use the feedbunk — often referred to as bunk-breaking — doesn't have to be like climbing Mount Everest, either. Reducing as much stress as possible for the calf is the common denominator for a smooth transition to eating from the feedbunk and moving on to life without mama. Key elements in pen design, ration formulation and even some tried-and-true tricks of the trade all play a critical role in taking the stress out of calf weaning.

Essential elements

There is a fair amount of strategy involved in getting calves trained to eat from a bunk without it causing undue stress and wreaking havoc on your paycheck.

Lamar, Mo., cattleman Cody Gariss annually bunk-breaks about

1,000 head of calves, 600 of which are purchased for backgrounding. He works to strategically place feedbunks inside his weaning pen, which comfortably houses 75-80 head of calves at a time.

"Feedbunks are in the middle of the pen, as well as along the perimeter," Gariss explains. "So if you have calves that like to walk the fence, they will eventually walk right into those bunks."

Adequate bunk space for the number of calves being weaned is another key component.

University of Missouri (MU) Livestock Specialist Eldon Cole suggests 18-22 inches (in.) of bunk space per animal when feeding once per day. MU resources also recommend the pen provide 300 square feet (sq. ft.) of space per 400- to 800-pound (lb.) calf. In drier climates, 200 sq. ft. is adequate, while in wetter conditions 500 sq. ft. of space per animal in the fall and winter is a better option.

Pens should also be equipped with



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easy access to 8-15 gallons of water per calf per day and be in a location to encourage regular observation.

"Water is critical," Cole says, "so make sure it's fresh and visible to the calves and easy to drink from. Water

affects feed intake, so you want both to be accessible."

Pens should have good drainage so calves can move easily to and from feed and water, says Gariss. "You don't want calves to be standing in knee-deep mud when going to the bunk."

From a health standpoint, Cole notes that sprinkling the weaning pen with water to hold down dust brings benefits.

"Make sure shade is plentiful, especially for calves carrying excessive hair, as with fescue problems," he says.

Fenceline weaning

In recent years, fenceline weaning has become a popular choice for many cattlemen who strive to take the stress out of weaning. For Quinton Bauer, who grazes about 150 head of Angus-based mama cows near Verona, Mo., stress-free is what it's all about. In fact, Bauer has devised a system that essentially helps him single-handedly wean 100 calves at a time.

It all starts with setting a creep feeder in the pasture with the cows and calves about a month prior to weaning. Bauer fills the feeders only once before initiating phase two, which involves installing a creep gate at the entrance of the paddock next to the one with the cows and calves. Then, he moves in the feedbunks.

With plenty of fresh grass in the paddock and Bauer hand-feeding the calves daily, the calves sort themselves from their mothers through the creep gate.

According to Bauer, 80%-90% of the calves will have sorted themselves

5 tips for keeping weaned calves healthy

Finding success at weaning time begins with having a healthy calf. University of Missouri Extension Veterinarian Craig Payne offers these five tips for keeping your weaned calves in tip-top shape.

1. Establish cow nutrition and colostrum intake. The starting point for a healthy calf at weaning time really begins before that calf is born. According to Payne, cow nutrition during pregnancy and adequate intake of high-quality colostrum are key for getting off to a good start. Dubbed fetal programming, Payne says studies continue to demonstrate the long-term health and performance benefits of calves that come from cows receiving adequate nutrition during gestation.

2. Minimize stress on the weaning calf. Any stressors — such as weaning itself, poor cattle handling and environmental challenges — have a negative impact on the immune system and can result in health challenges.

"In the same way, inadequate nutrition and/or inadequate intakes will also have a negative impact on health and performance," Payne explains. Good stockmanship skills and alternative weaning methods, such as fenceline weaning, can help to reduce stress on a calf at weaning. Payne also suggests working with an animal nutritionist to assure the weaning diet meets the dietary needs of the calf during the weaning period.

3. Develop a vaccination program. Don't forget to instill a complete health regimen for your calves. Standard vaccinations, according to Payne, include infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) Type I and II, bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV), parainfluenza-3 virus (PI₃) viruses and a clostridial (Blackleg). Additional vaccinations can be given for *Mannheimia haemolytica* (formerly known as *Pasteurella haemolytica*) and *Histophilus somni* (*Haemophilus somnus*). You should, however, consult with your herd veterinarian to establish a vaccination program right for your herd. Vaccination timing is also important to consider.

"Optimally, vaccinations should occur approximately three weeks prior to weaning," Payne says. "This gives the animal time to build immunity before it enters the weaning period." Booster vaccines can be followed up the day of weaning if necessary.

4. Remember deworming. Parasite infestations affect growth and performance in addition to the immunity of the animal.

"Cattle may be harboring parasites even though we don't see any outward effects," Payne says. He states that most parasite problems are subclinical in nature, which means they are there and having an effect, but not so severely that we can recognize it just by looking at the animal. The goal with deworming, according to Payne, is to deworm prior to weaning and have the animals clean before going into the weaning period. Optimal deworming time, however, should be discussed with your herd veterinarian.

5. Include a coccidiostat in the diet. Severe coccidia outbreaks during weaning can be devastating and lead to further health problems and poor performance due to the destruction of the gut lining caused by the organism.

"However," Payne says, "just like the other internal parasites, absence of clinical signs of coccidia infestation doesn't mean there isn't a problem. Subclinical infections account for most of the losses associated with coccidia."

from the cow. The remainder of the weaning process involves the fenceline technique.

“If those calves can touch their mother’s nose or smell them, it makes all the difference,” Bauer notes. “I can wean 100 calves by myself doing it this way. It’s as easy as going out and shutting a gate.”

On-feed

The bottom line in getting a calf broke to the feedbunk at weaning time is getting him to like what he eats. Feeding multiple times a day is crucial to bunk-training, but starting with a palatable ration is the key.

“When starting calves on feed, you need to concentrate the energy and protein because intake is low,” explains Justin Sexten, MU Extension beef nutrition specialist. “Using energy- and protein-dense feeds ensures the low intake provides adequate nutrients to support growth and respond to immune challenges.”

Initially, access to a very good-quality grass hay or even a grass-alfalfa mix the first few days to a week is essential, according to Chris Reinhardt, beef feedlot specialist with Kansas State University. Reinhardt says placing the hay in the feedbunk rather than the hay ring is an important step to bunk-breaking.

“The more-timid calves will avoid social interactions at the bunk and will camp out at the hay feeder,” he explains. “They’ll never receive the needed nutrients, and after the hay is gone, they won’t know where to eat.”

After a couple of days, Reinhardt suggests, put a well-formulated starting diet, made up of about half concentrate and half forage, at the rate of about ½%-1% of the calf’s body weight — or 3-6 lb. — on top of the hay in the feedbunk.

“After calves are consuming this feed readily, we can stop putting out hay and focus solely on the diet,” he says.

Gariss begins the weaning process by starting calves first on prairie hay and only a small amount of grain before transitioning to a total mixed ration (TMR) comprised of wet feed and ground hay, among other ingredients.

“We don’t typically start the cattle on that,” Gariss notes. “We have found over the years that the cattle start better on prairie hay and dry feed.”

Some cattlemen may prefer to not use wet feeds, since the dry-matter percentage is lower and it requires greater intake, Sexten says, while others like some

moisture in the ration to minimize dust and enhance palatability. He recognizes that for some cattlemen, weaning-ration formulation often comes down to available ingredients and operation limitations, such as having the necessary equipment to haul wet feeds.

“Target for 16%-protein diets at weaning with half the protein bypassing the rumen,” Sexten explains, noting that the rumen may not be functioning at full potential due to stress.

Whole corn is also preferred over processed corn to slow fermentation and reduce the risk of acidosis. Sexten further suggests including a coccidiostat or ionophore when bunk-breaking to control coccidiosis.

“When using an ionophore, you can improve performance while also reducing the acidosis risk,” he says.

With the 2013 crop harvest not yet complete, the verdict is still out as to the availability and affordability of a weaning ration’s popular component — corn. Sexten cautions cattlemen from using filler ingredients, though, as they are not cost-effective and take up space needed for nutrient-dense ingredients.

“Many people consider roughages the cheapest part of weaning diets,” Sexten says, “but they are the most expensive because they contribute to low average daily gain.” He goes on to note that poor-quality forage has no place in the weaning diet because nutrient intake is reduced and digestibility declines.

“Weaning is the most important part of the feeding period,” Sexten continues. “This is the time when feeding one to make sure they stay healthy provides rapid payback. Not to say there isn’t feed that is too expensive, but this is the time to make sure calves are eating and consuming nutrient-dense diets.”

Tried and true

The old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” could hold some merit at weaning time, too. Industry experts and cattlemen alike agree that one of the best ways to get a calf trained to eat from a feedbunk is to introduce it to feed while still on the cow.

“Some farmers swear by having an older cow, steer or some other animal that acts as a ‘baby sitter’ and will show the calves how to go to the feedbunk,” Cole explains.

Koshkonong, Mo., cattewoman Holly Meyer finds merit in feeding the calf prior



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to weaning, she says. “Even if you aren’t grain-feeding your cows, it’s helpful to obtain the weaning ration and feed even two to three times per week while the calf is still on the cow. The calves will learn to come to the bunk while following their mother.”

Meyer’s years of raising Angus seedstock at Bub Ranch have taught her that providing mineral to calves at weaning helps boost immunity and aids with pinkeye and hoof problems.

She also relies on an old farmer’s trick to help reduce any foot rot that could flare up in muddy weaning pens after rainfall. She says she saves both dollars and pounds by simply applying lime at the entryway

to wet, muddy pens and around mineral feeders.

While feed consumption is critical for a weaning calf, Gariss cautions against overfeeding calves the first few days. “You want the calves to keep coming back to the bunk because they’re hungry.”

A successful experience with bunk-training calves starts with having a healthy calf. As Bauer sums up, “The least amount of stress you can put on that animal (at weaning) the better.”



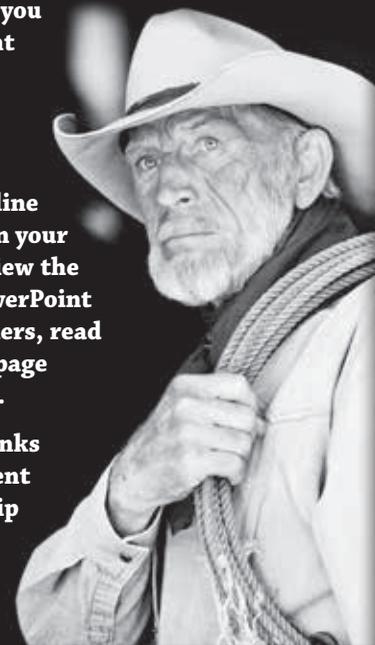
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