



# A NOSE AHEAD

Ranchers say nose flaps are the least stressful way to wean.

Story & photos by Heather Smith Thomas, freelancer

**A**brupt weaning can be stressful for calves and mama cows, and stress can lead to sick calves. Producers are discovering alternatives to the traditional way of weaning calves in a corral and taking the cows away. One such technique banks on the fact that a big calf doesn't need milk, but it still feels dependent on mama.

Mark Ehlke and his wife, Della, of Townsend, Mont., tried a new weaning method — using nose flaps — 13 years ago. Skeptical at

first, Ehlke says he “quickly became a believer.” They use the technique to get a head start on weaning.

The small plastic flaps can be easily installed with calves restrained in a headcatch. Then the calves are returned to their mothers, he says. The flap hangs down over nose and mouth, preventing the calf from getting a teat into its mouth to nurse, but the flap does not hinder eating grass or hay or drinking water.

“The calves still try pretty hard — especially the first day — to

nurse the cows, but only a rare few are able to nurse with the flap,” Ehlke says.

The calf cannot nurse, but it is not upset, because it's still with mom and has her companionship during the weaning process. The cow starts to dry up, and the calf adjusts to not having milk.

Five to seven days later, cows and calves can be separated from one another, and the flaps can be removed.

The Ehlkes left the flaps in a little longer than recommended.

“We decided that a few extra days wouldn't hurt, and timed it with the first set of shots to save extra handling,” he explains. “We gave preweaning vaccinations and put the nose flaps in at the same time. This saved one trip through the chute. Most of the flaps were in for 10 days to two weeks. Only a few flaps came out ahead of that, and we put most of those back in.”

When the pairs were separated, calves were hauled to corrals to be put on feed.

“As we were unloading at the preconditioning corrals, we took the flaps out of the calves as we let them out of the trailer,” he says.

There were no extra trips through the chute to deal with the nose flaps.

Glenn Benjamin has Angus cattle near Simla, Colo., and started using nose flaps more than 20 years ago. He tried it on 150 calves and now uses nose flaps on about 300 calves every year.

“We leave the flaps in for four or five days, which is about how long it takes for calves to give up trying to nurse,” says Benjamin.

## Easy to use

A nose flap is easy to insert, he notes. “I slide it into one nostril, give a little twist and pop it into the other side (like twisting a plastic bread bag closure), or bend it a little in the middle to make the space open up a bit so you can put the nobs into the nostrils. Then when you take it out, you push it down a little to give a little room



for twisting it out. I can take one out in a couple seconds.”

After removal, Benjamin washes the nose flaps to reuse them.

“We reused those first ones at least 10 years,” he says. “We rarely lose any. Only a few come out, and the yellow ones we use are easy to find if a calf does lose one.”

Benjamin says it’s important to let the calf out of the chute without it bumping the flap on the chute, which could knock it out of the nose. He immediately lets the calves go back to mama, rather than bunching up in a corral.

“It’s when they bunch up in a tight mob that they might knock the nose flaps out when they bump into each other. We have the gates open so the calves can run out and start finding mom,” he says.

“They run up to her and discover they can’t suck, so they run around to the other side, and they can’t suck there either,” he observes.

The pair stays together. Other than the calf not being able to nurse, the cow and calf are quite content.

After four or five days, Benjamin gathers the herd and hauls the calves to another location, leaving the cows in the pasture.

“We turn the calves into a new pasture, and they go right to

grazing and aren’t worried about their mothers,” he says.

“When we haul calves from various pastures, they go to a central group of pens with a set of scales,” Benjamin says.

There’s no bawling while they are weighing and sorting the calves. The calves are safer to handle because they are not upset.

“With traditional weaning, that first day they are always nervous, running around,” he says. “With this method, they are more relaxed.”

The flaps are inexpensive, and even though calves might lose a few each year, most of those don’t come out till the end.

“The ones that come out, we usually find in the trailer after we’ve hauled calves to the pens where we take them out, so we actually haven’t lost them,” he says.

Concludes Ehlke: “Our thinking is that if a person can do anything to alleviate stress on those calves, they are much better off.”

Creative solutions don’t have to be big and expensive. These simple nose flaps have helped operations without the infrastructure for fenceline weaning to be a nose ahead. |

Editor’s note: Heather Smith Thomas is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Salmon, Idaho.



A nose flap is relatively easy to insert by sliding it into one nostril, giving a little twist and popping it into the other side, says those who have used them. You can bend the nose flap a little in the middle to make the space open up a bit so you can put the nobs into the nostrils.