

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Early Weaning and Preconditioning

by Lacey Robinson, Kansas State University



As I write this first column, much of the Midwest is dealing with crippling drought conditions. We

are feeling the heat in Kansas as we nervously watch our ponds disappear and pastures deteriorate, and we face the reality that dismal hay and feed crops are going to cost us this winter. The stress is enough to make the toughest cattle producer want to disperse the herd and head for the beach.

Before you resort to running away with Jimmy Buffet to paradise, let's all take a deep breath and remember that there are things we can control from a management perspective to improve our circumstances and survive these challenges. (Let's face it, with those white legs you wouldn't last long on the beach.)

Reason to wean early

Early weaning is certainly a tool to consider for optimizing cattle health and resources during periods of feed shortage. Removing calves from their dams earlier than normal (at less than 180 days of age) alleviates pressure on dwindling pastures and reduces the nutrient requirements for cows.

It has been demonstrated that a calf weighing 250 pounds (lb.)-350 lb. will consume about 5.3 lb. of forage a day. The difference in daily intake between lactating and non-lactating cows is about 5.3 lb. If a 1,200-lb. cow needs roughly 26 lb. of forage per day, that means that for every 2.5 days the calf is weaned, there should be an additional day of grazing to support that cow.

Early weaning can be the gift that keeps on giving, as removing a cow's lactation requirement earlier means she can carry more condition into fall and winter. That translates to reduced cow maintenance costs because she needs less winter supplementation.

If increased body condition is maintained through winter, there is also the potential for improved conception rates the next spring.

Ranch revenue may also be enhanced due to increased cull



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

cow marketing options. It has been estimated that 15%-20% of the revenue generated by a cow-calf enterprise comes from the sale of cull cows and bulls. Weaning and preg-checking early gives producers the ability to maximize the value of older or open cows by beating the flood of cull cows on the market in November and December, when they are historically cheapest.

To truly maximize the benefits

of early weaning, it is typically necessary to retain ownership of those cattle for some period of time after weaning. If starting calves that are younger and lighter than you're used to at weaning seems a bit daunting, it's understandable; however, when the proper steps are taken, you may be pleasantly surprised at the results.

Early-weaning studies conducted

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About the author

Lacey Robinson grew up on an Angus seedstock operation in central Missouri as the oldest of three children. She was very involved in all aspects of the ranch and quickly realized the importance of health and husbandry to the success of the program.

Her interest in animal health led her to Black Hawk East College and then Kansas State University, where she received her bachelor's degrees in animal science and business and was a member of the livestock judging team.

Prior to pursuing a career in veterinary medicine, Robinson worked in marketing as a fieldman for the American Simmental Association and then as national ad sales manager for their publications.

Robinson received her doctorate of veterinary medicine from Kansas State College of Veterinary Medicine and stayed on to complete an internship in livestock medicine and surgery. Currently, she is teaching and providing field services in the livestock department at the Kansas State Veterinary Health Center and conducting research in beef cattle lameness and immunology.

She and her husband, Brad Fahrmeier, own Tailor Made Genetics, an Angus operation focused on raising bulls for commercial producers and heifer development near Olsburg, Kan.

by Kansas State University Research and Extension showed that calves weaned at 120-160 days (360-lb. average) gained as much weight and were just as healthy as calves that were weaned later. Health risks and death loss were no different in early-weaned calves than in those weaned at the more conventional ages of 180-200 days.

Starting on feed

Regardless of weaning age, it is critical that calves start eating dry feed immediately after separation from their dams to reduce incidence of morbidity and mortality. There are some things we can do to help get them to the bunk quicker.

Creep-feeding calves beginning three to four weeks before weaning could help train calves to eat concentrate-based feed and make for a smoother transition to the postweaning diet.

If creep-feeding isn't feasible, the starter ration can be top-dressed with hay for the first three days,

then try top-dressing the hay with the ration until cattle are acclimated and the roughage portion can be decreased. Providing calves with a quality grass forage — as well as an energy-dense, highly palatable starter diet — is essential.

Bunk and water height need to accommodate the smaller calf and assure there is enough bunk space available to allow all cattle to eat at once.

As we learn more about the importance of the microbiome to an animal's overall health, there is mounting evidence that the addition of probiotics and yeast-based feed supplements may warrant consideration. Such supplements have been shown to improve feed efficiency and reduce BRD incidence by enhancing rumen and intestinal health.

Vaccination strategy

Of course, no successful early-weaning strategy is complete without a well-planned herd health

and vaccination program. Ideally, the first round of clostridial- and viral-disease vaccinations, as well as stressful events such as castration

and longer duration. Consulting your veterinarian to determine the most effective strategy for immunizing young calves to address the health

Don't just survive weaning this year. Find ways to thrive during this critical period by implementing strategies that will boost calf health and your bottom line.

and dehorning, should get done at grass-turnout time (if not before).

Several studies show castrating at birth has no impact on weight gain when compared to calves castrated at weaning. Plus, those steers won't be burning the energy that overzealous bull calves exert chasing hot cows around the pasture.

Calves should receive another viral vaccination two to three weeks prior to weaning with a booster given two to four weeks after the initial vaccination, which creates a stronger immune response of

challenges common to your area is extremely important.

Preconditioning calves, regardless of weaning age, is the essence of health and husbandry. Better preparing calves for the feedlot with the combination of vigilant stockmanship and science will ultimately result in improved cattle health and feedlot performance. |

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* devoted to the care and well-being of the herd.



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