THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Weaning Decisions Have Lasting Effects

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois

Every decision matters. Some decisions greatly affect how today or tomorrow will go; other decisions affect how the next several months, or even the year, will go. Weaning and the decisions surrounding this management practice have immediate and lasting effects on the nutritional requirements of your cows and the calves at side.

Given the impact weaning has on the entire operation, it is wise to have a good plan in place. Once you have a plan, you need to be ready and willing to improvise and to adjust the plan if Mother Nature throws a curveball.

Typically, forage availability and quality will dictate the best time to wean. When drought conditions or overstocking diminish forage availability, consider early weaning.

A substantial amount of research, including several studies here at the University of Illinois, has been done on early weaning. Weaning the calf and ceasing lactation immediately reduces the cows' requirements. Your cow herd will go into winter in better condition, and you will likely need less supplement to get or keep cows in proper condition heading into next year's calving and breeding seasons.

The alternative is waiting too late to wean and having cows that are thin headed into winter. If you don't spend the extra money to add condition prior to calving, you will likely experience poorer conception rates next year. Again, one simple decision — weaning — has lasting effects.

Effects on calf

Although the decision of when to wean is often driven by forage availability and the condition of the cow herd, weaning also has significant effects on the calf.

Progressive cattlemen know the value of good genetics. If you have invested in good Angus genetics and have a set of calves with the genetic potential to gain fast and achieve superior marbling, you don't want to squander that now.

Nutrition and management, starting at conception, will ultimately dictate if those calves reach their full genetic potential. By 120 days of age, more than half of the calf's energy requirement is met from sources other than milk. If forage is limited, your calves are going to show it.

Yes, you can supplement your cows and provide creep feed to your calves, but weaning 30-60 days earlier is likely the more economical option. Early-weaned calves are extremely efficient and able to achieve remarkable gains. Numerous studies have documented the efficiency and carcass quality potential of early-weaned calves.

Regardless of the age at which you are going to wean, you need to take the appropriate steps to ensure your calves are ready for this transition.

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Weaning is stressful. It's kind of like sending your kid off to college. They move to a new place (sometimes halfway across the country), they have new friends (some of those friends didn't come from as good of a home as yours), they have to find their own food, they don't rest as much as they should, they don't drink enough water, etc.

Some kids transition fine to college. Others struggle, and some never figure it out. The same is true for weaned calves. You need to have a plan to prepare them for the transition.

Prepare for transition

Work with your veterinarian to make sure you have a good herd health plan in place that includes preweaning vaccinations for the calves. The stress at weaning can compromise the immune system and make the calf more susceptible to disease.

Bovine respiratory disease (BRD) is the leading health challenge in beef calves. Calves that are affected by BRD cost you money and rarely reach their genetic potential for growth or carcass merit. Skipping this management practice will likely affect what you can accomplish on the nutrition side.

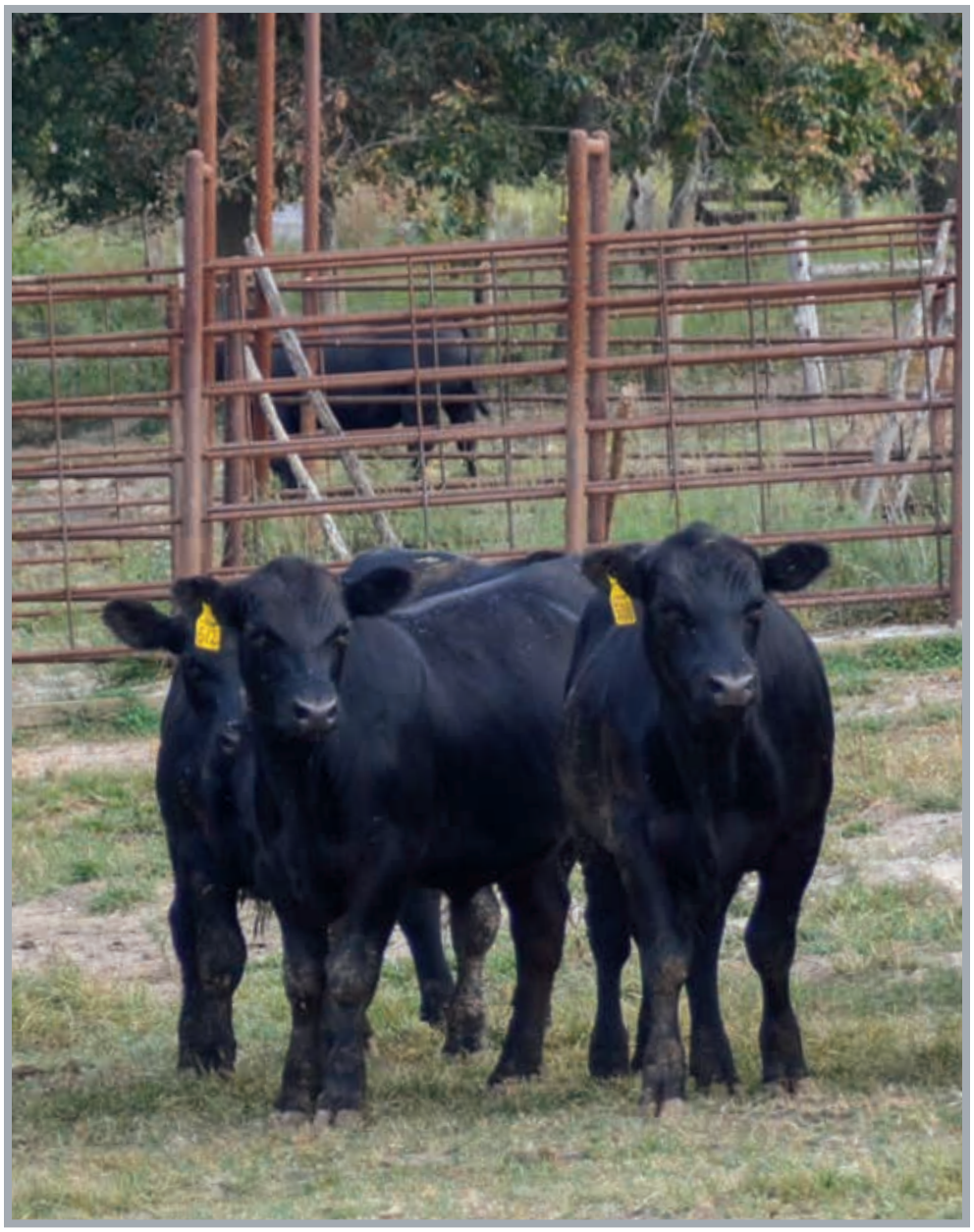
One of the keys to successful weaning is transitioning to feed. Calves that don't eat are much more likely to get sick. Consider creep-feeding for two to four weeks prior to weaning. Exposing calves to grain and a feedbunk prior to weaning greatly increases the likelihood that the calves will go to the bunk once weaned.

Energy-dense, high-protein and palatable feedstuffs should be considered for creep feed. This is especially true if you are weaning at a young age. I could discuss at length all of the pros and cons about creep-feeding, but I will save that for a different time. Bottom line: Exposing calves to grain prior to weaning helps calves transition when they enter the lot.

In summary

Cattlemen make decisions every day that affect the operation today, tomorrow and next year. I would argue that one of the most important management decisions is weaning.

Well-timed weaning with appropriate steps taken to ensure a smooth transition can be used to fix problems and can add value to your operation. Poorly timed weaning, with no plan in place to prepare calves for the transition, can negate many good decisions leading up to that point and cause problems — and cost money — well into the future.



Editor's note: "The Digestive Tract" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.

About the author

Dan Shike grew up on a diversified grain and livestock operation in western Illinois. Shike's family owns and operates Shike Cattle Co., and he is actively involved with his father and brother in the management and marketing of the cattle.

He received his associate degree from Black Hawk College–East Campus, his bachelor's degree from Kansas State University, and his master's degree and doctorate from the University of Illinois.

Currently, Shike is an associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois and is responsible for teaching and research in beef cattle nutrition and management. He also serves as the coordinator for the livestock judging team and has been invited to judge livestock shows in more than 35 states and in Australia.

Shike is the faculty supervisor for the University of Illinois' three beef cattle operations: a 200-cow, purebred Angus operation on campus; a 225-cow, registered SimAngus operation in western Illinois; and an 850-cow commercial Angus operation in southern Illinois. His research focuses on identifying nutritional strategies and management practices that improve efficiency, reproduction and profitability in beef cow-calf production.

Dan lives in Sadorus, Ill., with his wife, Jennifer, and their three children, Olivia, Hunter and Harper.