



AVOID THESE 3 COMMON WEANING PITFALLS

Create a weaning plan with flexibility and from a calf's point of view.

Have you defined what success and failure look like in your weaning program?

Success might look like live, healthy calves that put on weight with minimal intervention. On the flip side, failure may be calf mortality, sick or stressed calves, a high rate of treatment and less weight to sell. No matter your definitions, having a plan in place can help you avoid weaning pitfalls and, ultimately, failure during this critical time frame.

“Weaning shows how successful a producer has been for the past year,” says Chris Forcherio, beef research manager with Purina Animal Nutrition. “For calves going to market, it’s a producer’s payday. For calves staying in the herd, it’s

a time to help them get ready for their next phase of production.”

Make plans now to avoid these three weaning-time pitfalls.

Pitfall #1:

The plan is there is no plan

“Too often producers just go out and wean. They find a break in the weather and decide it’s time,” says Forcherio. “The ‘just do it’ mentality may work out, but much like a producer plans for breeding and calving every year, they should plan for weaning.”

Develop a flexible plan at least a month in advance. Planning ahead a month gives you time to order feed, work on your health program, order vaccines and more. Part of your health program may include preweaning vaccines that can be administered well in advance of weaning day to boost immunity.

Pitfall #2:

Facility failure

Prepare facilities for calves trying to get back to their mothers. If calves are in a fenced area, check and reinforce fences as needed to prevent calves from escaping. For corral areas, be sure gates are secured and without gaps.

Another aspect of facilities is the environment. Small, tightly confined areas with mud are not ideal for calves. Give calves a stress-free space with plenty of room and grass.

Feedbunk placement and space are also critical.

“Producers often put feedbunks in a place that’s convenient for them, not for their cattle,” says Forcherio. “Place feedbunks in an area where calves will run into them, not just a place that’s convenient.”

Bunks should be placed perpendicular to fencelines so calves can bump into feed as they are circling the fences. To prevent calves from competing for bunk space, provide 12 inches (in.) of bunk space for hand-fed feeds and 6 in. to 8 in. of bunk space for self-fed feeds.

Pitfall #3:

The height of water and hay

Beyond making sure calves can find water sources and ensuring there is clean, fresh water available for all calves, another common pitfall is water accessibility.

“Make sure your water trough is not too tall,” says Forcherio. “We tend to assume that 400- or 450-pound (lb.) calves are going to be able to reach the same waterer set up for a 1,200-lb. cow when that may not be the case.”

The same concept applies to hay feeders.

“I often refer to hay out of reach of calves as the ‘devil’s tower of hay in the hay ring,’” says Forcherio. “The hay ring is out, and the round bale is in the hay ring, but the calves can’t reach the tower of hay in the middle.”

Check your hay feeders to ensure they aren’t too tall or deep for the shorter necks of calves. If hay is out of reach, do what you can to spread hay from the center toward the outside of the hay ring.

Plan to drive feed intake

What is Forcherio’s top piece of advice? Have a plan to maximize feed intake.

“The end goal is to drive intake and get calves eating the nutrients they need to stay healthy,” says Forcherio. “Anything you can do to set calves up to eat at target intake levels will help them have a higher chance of success.”

Does your weaned calf nutrition program stack up? Find out with a Proof Pays feeding trial, or learn more about weaned calf solutions at purinamills.com/cattle. ■