THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Decisions at weaning

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois

For spring-calving herds, the onset of late summer-early fall means it is weaning time. For cow-calf producers, this is like harvest for grain farmers. If you sell your calves at weaning, this is when you find out how many pounds you produced and what they were worth.

However, it is imperative to remember that management around weaning could have significant ramifications — not only on how many pounds you have to sell, but also on what those pounds are worth. There is nothing more disappointing than death loss right before it is time to sell.

I have discussed in previous columns that weaning is easily one of the most influential decisions a cow-calf producer will make. What complicates the decision is that it is not a single decision. There are several decisions that have to be made when weaning.

The when

When to wean is the first decision. Natural weaning in cattle occurs between 7 and 14 months of age. However, in most management systems, weaning occurs at 6-7 months of age.

Some operations will wean essentially at the same time every year. Assuming breeding and calving dates are consistent from year to year, this certainly makes sense most of the time. I would argue it doesn't make sense in years of abnormal forage availability or environmental conditions.

If forage availability is low due to drought, early weaning should be considered. Early weaning could mean weaning a month early, but it could also mean weaning two to three months early during severe drought conditions.

Management at weaning has significant ramifications — not only on how many pounds you have to sell, but also on what those pounds are worth.

This decision requires balancing the costs associated with nutrition and management of the cows and the costs associated with nutrition and management of the calves. If forage availability is low and you decide not to wean early, either the cows will get thin (which could lead to reproductive problems the next year) or you will need to supplement cows. If you wean calves early, you will need to have adequate facilities and be able to provide proper nutrition to those calves.

There have been numerous research studies evaluating the effects of early weaning on both the cow and the calf. Early weaning immediately reduces the nutritional requirements for the cow, and thus results in either increased carrying capacity of pastures or improved body condition score (BCS) of cows, or both.

Continued on page 44

The performance of early-weaned calves depends largely on the nutritional strategy used. If early-weaned calves are fed an energy-dense diet *ad libitum,* their gains will be significantly greater than calves at the side of the cow. Obviously the cost of gain for those calves and feeder-calf price will ultimately determine if it is profitable.

The how

Once the decision of when to wean is made, you need to decide what weaning method will be utilized. Abrupt weaning is still the most common weaning method in conventional cow-calf operations. After cows and calves are separated, calves are typically hauled to a new location.

Ideally, this is to an on-farm background lot. However, in many cases it means they are transported to a sale barn or feedlot.

This weaning method requires the least labor, but it is the most stressful on calves. Calves that are abruptly weaned will bawl more, walk more and eat less than calves weaned using alternative strategies.

The fenceline weaning method is one of the most used alternative weaning methods. Instead of hauling calves away after separating them from cows, the calves are just on the other side of the fence. This allows cows and calves to see and hear each other, but prevents nursing. Typically, calves are then hauled away after a few days to a week.

The biggest limiting factor for adoption among producers for this method is proper fence and facilities. You need to have good fence and adequate facilities for calves for this method to work.

Another strategy that has been investigated is the two-stage weaning method. This method utilizes a nose flap that is placed in the calf's nose and prevents nursing. The calves are still able to graze, and this allows cows and calves to stay together.

Typically, the calves are then separated, and the nose flap is removed a few days later. Calves weaned in two stages vocalize less, walk less and eat more than calves that are weaned abruptly.

Careful consideration of weaning time and weaning strategies will help maximize the pounds and value of your calf crop.

Creeping

Another important decision that needs to be made is with regard to creep-feeding. Calves that have been creep-fed prior to weaning transition more quickly to feed in the receiving/backgrounding phase.

Smooth and timely transition to grain in the receiving phase is essential to keeping calves healthy. Typically, three weeks is adequate time for creep-feeding calves prior to weaning.

Although there are benefits to creep-feeding, the costs associated with feed, equipment and labor need to be strongly considered when determining if creep-feeding makes sense for your operation.

In summary

Weaning time is an exciting time for cow-calf producers. It is when they get to gather up the year's production. Much hard work and many management decisions have led up to this point in the production calendar. However, the work is not done.

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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.