

On Your Mark – Get Set – Wean!

Early weaning can boost cow efficiency and give calves a head start, too.

Story & photos by
BECKY MILLS

“I have 150 factories,” says Fountain Run, Ky., cattleman Bruce Layne as he describes his mother cows. “My job is to spend as little as possible getting them to produce the most.”

For the last five years, early weaning has been an essential part of that philosophy.



Bruce Layne boosts cow productivity and gets his calves off to a fast start with early weaning.

“Everybody knows the most expensive part of the cow-calf business is maintaining the cow,” he explains. “When you pull the calves off early, you cut that cost.”

Aided by early weaning, Layne estimates he can maintain a cow for a year and produce a 500-pound (lb.) calf for \$170. That includes \$48 for hay, \$50 for 1,000 lb. of feed, \$20 for minerals, \$10 for diesel and \$40 for fertilizer.

“Milk is the most expensive thing we can feed,” he says. “Feeding the calf is more efficient than feeding the cow. I can group the dry cows together and just feed them hay.”

Ohio State University (OSU) animal scientist Francis Fluharty agrees. “It is more efficient to feed harvested feed directly to the calves than to feed it to the cows to produce milk.” He adds, “It varies greatly by the part of the country and the forages, but the best handle we have is it drops the cows’ dry matter needs by 15%.”

At OSU, researchers have been practicing early weaning on their Angus and Angus-Simmental herds since the mid-90s.

For Hillsboro, Ohio, commercial producer Brian Michael, early



Early weaning doesn't stunt Layne's replacement heifers.

weaning is about the cows, especially the young ones.

“We have a younger herd with a lot of heifers,” Michael says. “I use early weaning to get them in condition and get them bred back.”

He says, “The 2-year-olds are the hardest ones to get bred back.

Getting the calves away early really helps. They don't get pulled down, and they cycle better. They keep growing like they should and make a better cow.”

“Early weaning is an awfully good way to reduce stress on those animals,” Fluharty agrees.

After four years of early weaning, Michael is not exactly complaining about the effect the practice has on the calves, either. “They do so much better. They don't get sick and only bawl for a day or two before they get started on feed.”

He weans at an average of 120

days and says the calves' gain increased to 4 pounds (lb.) per head per day on a 12%-14% protein ration and free-choice, high-quality hay. He sells part of the Angus and Angus-cross calves as feeders when they reach the 550- to 600-lb. mark and feeds the rest himself.

“You can have them ready to harvest at 11 to 12 months,” he comments.

Layne's Angus, Hereford and black-baldie calves don't drag their hooves, either. He weans them in January when they are around 120-150 days old. By June or July, the 700-lb.-plus calves are on a truck to a Nebraska feedyard. By November or December, they are in the cooler.

Get on track

Layne starts their fast track to weaning by creep-feeding the same ration he uses during weaning and

Grass or grain?

While a grain-on-grass approach works well for Fountain Run, Ky., cattleman Bruce Layne, early-weaned calves also do well on a concentrate ration.

“It depends on your goals,” says Francis Fluharty, Ohio State University (OSU) animal scientist. “There is no pure right way to do this.

“If you keep early weaned calves confined, you'll get a 1:3½ feed conversion. On grass, it is closer to the efficiency you get with creep-feeding, around 1:7,” he adds. “If you try to early wean calves on large pastures, they will suffer from the lack of milk. But if you are trying to early wean calves for the benefit of the cow and the market, you can put them on limited pasture.”

At OSU, they opt for the concentrate program. Fluharty says, “For the first two weeks, we keep them on an 18% protein ration, then drop it back to 16% until they are around 205 days old.”

He says their early-weaned calves are 100-150 pounds (lb.) heavier at 205 days than the calves still with the cows on grass.

“That's why early weaning enhances marbling,” he comments.

However, he warns, “If you go down to a 12% to 14% protein ration, you will reduce their carcass weight, and you'll end up making them smaller and fatter. Early weaning is not the thing to do with smaller-framed cattle if you are not going to implant and feed enough protein.”

He also adds, “With early weaning, you will reduce the final weight and carcass weight. Even by hitting a higher grade, you don't make up for that — we still sell by the pound. An aggressive implant program is critical.”

Fluharty says a concentrate ration works well for potential replacement heifers, too. “At 205 days, they are fatter and 125 pounds heavier than later-weaned calves. Then we put them on our traditional heifer program and shoot for gains of 1¾ to 2 pounds of gain per head per day. Eighty percent of them are cycling at 7½ months of age.”

He adds, “At a year of age, their hip heights are not shorter than the calves that are traditionally weaned. They do not go into anestrus when their gains slow down. They keep cycling.”



backgrounding — a mix of corn gluten feed, soy hull pellets, cracked corn, Rumensin® and minerals.

“We put the creep feeders out when we turn out the bulls. It helps bring the cows in heat,” he remarks.

He preps the calves by vaccinating them with modified-live virus (MLV) vaccines for the viral diseases and for pasteurized four weeks prior to weaning, then again two weeks later. “That gives the vaccines a full chance to work.”

University of Georgia (UGA) veterinarian Melvin Pence says there could be one glitch with the vaccination protocol. With calves this young, they are still under the influence of maternal antibodies, and the vaccines may not work as well as they would on older calves.

“I would continue to vaccinate as he is now, but might booster at 5 to 6 months [of age] with another four-way modified-live vaccine, pasteurized and seven-way blackleg,” Pence suggests.

To help keep weaning anxiety to a minimum in his operation, Layne practices fenceline weaning as well as early weaning. He pulls the cows out and puts them in an adjoining pasture.

“We don’t move the calf; we move the cow,” he explains. “It reduces stress. He (the calf) eats out of the same trough and drinks the same water he was before weaning.”

Layne weans by breeding groups of 20 to 25 head.

“If we have an old cow that needs

extra feed we’ll put her with the group or a herd bull. Or, we’ll put a new group in with a group that was weaned a week or so ago. It has a calming effect.”

While self-feeders make feeding a snap, Layne does spend extra time caring for the calves. “We do what the weather dictates,” he says. “We’ll roll out some hay to give him some insulation from the cold ground, or we’ll put out rolls of hay for a windbreak.”

Even with his low-stress weaning procedure and vaccination program, he still says he’ll doctor five or six calves with respiratory problems.

After a couple of weeks, he’ll separate steers and heifers. He limits the heifers to 4 lb. per head per day of feed, but works the steers up to 1½% of feed per pound of body weight. Steers and heifers are also on fescue and clover pastures.

Layne says his cattle average a conversion rate of about 7 lb. of feed per pound of gain, for a feed cost of 35¢ per pound of gain, but it varies according to the season. “In April we’re probably under 30¢, but in June the grass gets tougher and feed consumption goes up.”

By July, all but the replacement heifers and purebred bulls are sent to the feedyard for custom feeding while his 150 factories rest up for their next shift.



Summertime start

Early weaning is just part of Bruce Layne’s total program. Calving in the summer, specifically August and September, is another.

“Here, 90% of the producers calve in the spring, January through April,” says the Fountain Run, Ky., producer. “We have a lot of mud and snow. Why would we want to calve in the snow, rain, wind and short daylight hours? We calve in the shade trees. I could check calves barefooted if I wanted.”

He adds, “My cattle require almost no maintenance in the summer. They are on fescue and clover pastures. That frees the summer up for making hay, building fence and vacationing.”

He also says, “The fescue gets better in October and November. The cows milk better, and the calves can use the grass.”

“We breed during the cool temperatures,” Layne continues. “The cows cycle better, and we get conception rates in the high 80s.”

University of Illinois (U of I) animal scientist Dan Faulkner says they compared early fall calving, or September and October, with later calving in their southern Illinois research herd. They liked the economics so well they left the cows on the early schedule.

“It is much less expensive to feed the cows,” he reports. “There are actually not a lot of disadvantages to it if you do early weaning. The lighter calves are ready for grass and can be sold on a better market in the spring.”

Since Layne retains ownership on his calves, summer calving puts his finished steers on the market in November and December rather than the traditionally high-market month of April. However, he says, “This way my cattle don’t have to go through the blizzards in the West.”

He also says, “If I get a higher conception rate because of breeding in the cooler weather and increased livability, I’ll have enough extra pounds to sell to make up for the lower price.”