

Weaning Alternatives for Beef Cattle Operations

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Weaning is very important to the success of a beef cattle operation. It can be a stressful time for cows, calves, and ranchers.

Normally beef calves are weaned at ~200 days of age. However, there can be significant advantages to separating the calves from the cows at far earlier ages. Many of the benefits associated with early weaning are more related to the cow than the calf. By eliminating lactation, the nutrient requirements of a cow will be reduced by as much as 30%. This reduction in nutrient demand is what leads to the benefits associated with early weaning. Since the cow's requirements are lower, theoretically, 5-10% less forage will be consumed. Reducing forage consumption may allow an operation to run more cows or prevent the need to liquidate a portion of the herd in dry years. Another benefit of reducing the cow's nutrient requirements is the opportunity to maintain or improve body condition score, a key to future reproductive success. During this period, the cow will be in early- to mid-gestation and, such, requirements will be as low as any other time in the production cycle. The quality of the forage consumed will generally exceed requirements, allowing for an improvement in body condition. Early weaning can be particularly advantageous for first-calf heifers and young cows. Since they are still growing, their nutrient requirements can be quite high. By eliminating the requirement for lactation, more of the nutrients consumed can go to support growth, pregnancy, and maintenance of body condition. Body condition gained while on pasture is generally far more economical than feeding cows to gain body condition over the winter.



Fenceline weaning in Eastern S.D.

In addition to the benefits for the cow, early weaning may also have benefits for the calf. Some research suggests that weaning calves early and placing them directly into a feedlot can improve feed efficiency and carcass quality. However, these advantages do not come without a cost. Generally, calves that are weaned early and placed directly on feed are on feed for longer periods of time and finish at lighter weights than those that are either normally weaned or early weaned and backgrounded for a period of time.

Economics must be considered prior to initiating an early weaning program. While the advantages gained by reducing the cow's nutrient requirements are substantial, the reduced cost on the cow side must be carefully weighed against the cost of feeding the calves for longer periods and selling fewer pounds. There is not a clear answer for every operation in every year. Depending on the markets for feed and cattle, the opportunities for added profit may come and go. Other considerations when evaluating early weaning are:

- 1) how to best manage castration, dehorning, and vaccination programs;
- 2) whether or not to creep feed;
- 3) the potential need for additional facilities and labor to manage newly weaned calves.

One alternative that could be utilized to reduce the stress on calves at weaning time is fenceline weaning. Fenceline weaning is a management system in which the calves are removed from their dams but are allowed to see, hear, and smell the dams. Depending on the fencing used, physical contact may also be possible.

To successfully implement fenceline weaning, fencing should be substantial enough to prevent calves from nursing and keep cows and calves separated (see photo). Producers have used various combinations of electric and non-electric, and high-tensile, barbed, and woven wire fencing. Cows and calves should be pastured together in the pasture where calves will be after weaning. They should have at least one week in the pasture to allow time for calves to become familiar with the fences and water source. At weaning, return calves to the same pasture and move cows to the adjoining pasture. Some producers have found it useful to use a yearling or a cow without a calf in the weaning pasture to lead the calves to the water source.

Fenceline weaning fits well into a management system where maximizing gain is not the top priority (replacement heifer development or backgrounding calves). Performance of the weaned calves is highly dependent on forage quality and quantity. Options to provide high quality forage in the weaning pasture are: 1) graze early in the season and allow adequate regrowth prior to weaning; 2) harvest hay and then graze the hay ground at weaning time; and 3) plant ryegrass, small grains, or other annual forages to provide high quality forage. The need for supplementation of calves weaned on pasture depends on forage quality and quantity and the desired average daily gain.

Early weaning and fenceline weaning have become increasingly popular management strategies. Both can be highly effective, but require careful evaluation of resources. For more information, contact your local Extension Livestock Educator.