

COW/CALF MANAGEMENT

Should you Consider Early Weaning?

Jamie Larson, Department of Animal Science, University of Minnesota

Early weaning is a management practice that has become more common in recent years due to drought conditions, but has continued to be a successful management tool in some situations as the benefits have been uncovered. Early weaning generally means weaning calves when they are 3 to 5 months of age as compared to the more common 6 to 8 months. There are several advantages to weaning early, but also some disadvantages.

PASTURE MANAGEMENT

When cows cease milk production their consumption decreases, providing less stress on pastures. During dry conditions this can create an opportunity to preserve what little forage remains or allow an increased stocking rate when it is not dry. Weaning calves can cut forage consumption by as much as 50%. If calves are not sold directly after weaning, there is a need for facilities where calves can be fed a concentrate.

COW REPRODUCTION

This is an area that can have the biggest economical returns, especially if cows are in poor condition or if you are trying to move up the calving season. Some studies have indicated that cows not being suckled will have increased fertility. Studies have shown that cows in good body condition will rebreed sooner. If calves are weaned before the breeding season begins, cows will have a chance to gain some condition and potentially increase fertility.

CALF HEALTH

Calves weaned early still have passive immunity from their mothers. Studies have indicated that if early weaned calves are vaccinated one month prior to weaning and again at 6 months of age, they are healthier throughout the feeding period than conventionally weaned calves. Calves should also be castrated and dehorned two weeks before weaning to reduce stress at weaning. Some studies have also shown that fence line weaning decreases stress in young calves, which will help their immunity. Early weaned calves will only reach this potential by being intensively managed. Creep feeding calves before they are weaned will assist in the transition and will also contribute to fewer health problems. Calves should be fed a high grain, high protein (16%) diet that includes an ionophore. This will increase the input cost of these calves, so the economics need to be evaluated.

FEEDLOT ADVANTAGES

Calves weaned early have an improved feed efficiency and similar yield grades as conventionally weaned calves. Early weaned calves can also have improved meat quality, with a greater percentage grading low choice or better. These economic benefits can best be captured if ownership is retained through the finishing phase or if calves are sold at a premium. If you are providing calves that will make more money for the feeder it is important that you get paid more for them!

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Another option is to consider early weaning only part of the cow herd. Cows that make good candidates, such as thin cows, two and three year old cows, late calvers, and cows that will be culled in the fall, could be weaned while other calves remain on cows.

Several studies have compared early weaned calves with conventionally weaned calves by measuring characteristics in the early weaned calves at the time the conventionally weaned calves were weaned to provide equal comparisons. In most studies, early weaned calves had a similar or greater body weight and similar or higher ADG than conventionally weaned calves. These studies have also shown that with early weaning, cow body condition improves, cows begin to cycle sooner, and pregnancy rates increase. Early weaning does require more management and attention to the weaned calves. It also adds cost initially, so these costs need to be captured elsewhere to make this economical. These costs can be gained back by the decrease in pasture pressure, the increase in fertility of cows, the improvements in feedlot performance or the gains in selling cull cows earlier. Early weaning may not work for everyone, but consider its advantages to see if it will work in your operation.