

E X T E N S I O N

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WEANING CHANGES

Beef calf weaning is over for this year but that may be a good time for producers to evaluate their program and consider if they need to do something differently. Many producers are moving to a more cattle friendly procedure than what has been used. Perhaps some of your producers need to consider such a change. There are two separate articles which follow and both are espousing methods to reduce stress at weaning.

(CVB)

LOW-STRESS WEANING

Good for the Calves...Good for the Cows...Good for You.

Weaning is the process of separating a calf from its mother. It typically takes place in the fall of the year. It can be a very traumatic time for both the cow and her calf. The key to success is to minimize stress. Calves that are stressed will go off feed, which causes them to be much more susceptible to sickness. Contented calves with a full belly will seldom, if ever, get sick. Cows that are stressed will lose weight and valuable body condition, which is needed to get them through the winter with minimum feed supplementation. I've also heard that ranchers who are stressed can become very difficult to live with.

Across-the-Fence weaning is a method we have successfully used for the last 12 years. Properly done, it is a very low-stress method of weaning for both the cow and her calf. Once the cows and calves have been separated, they are allowed to have some contact with one another across the fence for a few days. Most good fences will work. We use a very simple electric two-wire fence.

I have heard of several variations of across-the-fence weaning, but my favorite involves leaving both the cows and the calves out

on grass or other forages. If you can keep your cows and calves out of dusty or muddy lots there will be much fewer health and other stress related problems. It's not natural for cattle to be confined in lots, eating harvested and/or processed feed. You will also discover that calves are much less likely to spook and stampede if they are not shut up. In fact, we have never had our calves spook and try to run through a fence since we quit shutting them up.

We like to move our pairs into the pasture the calves will be weaned in, a day or two prior to weaning so the calves will remain in familiar surroundings. This should be one of your better pastures. The calves will be able to locate all the water sources and perimeter fences while they are still with their mothers. For best results the primary water source for the calves should be located near the fence line. You should also avoid having corners in the dividing fence where animals on either side of the fence will tend to bunch up.

On weaning day we no longer ride out to gather pairs at daybreak. We relax after breakfast with a hot cup of coffee and allow the cows and calves to finish their early morning grazing routine. Around mid to late morning we slowly bring the pairs in to our sorting corral. Once the herd has been gathered, we go back to the house for another cup of coffee while the calves find their mothers for one last drink of milk. When we return, the herd will be quietly loafing. There won't be any bawling or signs of stress. Keep in mind, cows do not understand the concept of time. They may have some regular routines and habits, but time means nothing to them. Ranchers would do a much better job of handling their livestock if they threw away their watches. Why does anything have to be completed by a certain time?

The sorting facilities do not have to be fancy or expensive. All you really need is a big corral with two gates. One gate that lets the cows

out to their pasture and another to let the calves back out to theirs. If you have allowed the herd sufficient loafing time, many of the cows will be ready to file out when you open their gate, especially if they think they are going to fresh pasture. This is no place for loud, whip swinging cowboys. If you are patient, the herd will essentially sort itself. Calves are less likely to go past you so they aren't hard to hold back. After the first jag of cows have left the corral you can let a few calves out the other gate. Before you know it, the sorting will be done and nobody will be stressed or upset.

A word of caution: If your cattle are not familiar with this type of handling, they won't handle exactly as I have described. Don't become discouraged, though. Throw away your watch, be very patient and work them as slowly and as quietly as you possibly can. The next time the herd is worked it will be much easier to handle. I've found that most cowherds are easier to train than most cowboys.

If possible, we like to leave two or three older animals with the calves to provide some reassurance and leadership. On their own, a herd of freshly weaned calves has absolutely no sense of leadership or direction. Since the calves are returning to the same pasture they came from, they usually won't be the least bit bothered by the day's activities. It will usually take at least two or three hours before they realize something is amiss. After a couple of hours of grazing in their new pasture, some of the cows will realize their calves are not close by, and will go in search of them.

Most people will say, "You can't wean a calf across the fence from its mother. It will never work. They will tear down the fence. It will create even more stress for the calf and the cow." Over the years I have spent considerable time watching individual cows and calves. Both will leave the fence to eat, but after a while the cow will return to check on her calf. When summoned by his mother the calf will come back to the fence. As soon as they get across the fence from one another most of their anxiety will disappear. Often, you'll see a cow and her calf lying down on opposite sides of the fence, both contentedly chewing their cud. The next time you notice them they will probably be out grazing.

What if a couple of calves slip through the fence? Relax, it's not the end of the world. Whenever it is convenient just walk the pairs back to your sorting corral and separate them again. In twelve years, we have had only one calf and one cow that refused to stay where they belonged. After the second escape, we shut the calf up until the cows were moved. The fence-jumping cow was loaded up and hauled to the sale barn.

After three days, fewer and fewer cows will come back to the fence. They know where their calves are, but they are becoming less and less concerned about them. Likewise, the calves are beginning to realize they don't really need their mothers any more. It's as though you have allowed them the opportunity to gradually break the bond that has held them together for the last six months.

We always wait at least four days before we move the cows away from the calves. By this time they are usually so excited about going to fresh pasture that all we have to do is open the gates ahead of them. Very few, if any, will consider turning back for their calves.

In just four or five days, weaning is over. The cows are happy and storing up fat for the winter. The calves are healthy and adjusting well to life without mom. There is no shrink or weight loss. Some friends and customers of Pharo Cattle Company, Don and John Palmer, weighed their steer calves one year at weaning and again ten days later. Those steer calves gained a remarkable 1.5 pounds per day while being weaned on native grass across the fence from their mothers. This is something most of the so-called experts with degrees in animal health and nutrition will never be able to achieve.

Don Palmer suggests that you avoid riding or driving through the calves for the first few days of weaning. Whenever the cows see you out there they will all come running to the fence. Don says, "Go back to the house and drink a cup of coffee while you observe the weaning process through a pair of binoculars." What are you going to do out there anyway? The calves don't need fed, don't need doctored and don't need you.

Weaning doesn't have to be as difficult or as stressful as we have been led to believe. The only thing that would be less stressful than across-

the-fence weaning would be to not wean at all. Some of our customers are doing just that.

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Reprinted with permission from Kit Pharo, a no-nonsense seedstock producer in eastern Colorado. He shares his philosophies and opinions in a bimonthly newsletter that is mailed out to over 20,000 ranchers. To receive this free newsletter, call 1-800-311-0995 or send an email to Kit@PharoCattle.com.

Source: [Kit Pharo](#), Pharo Cattle Co., Cheyenne Wells, CO

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PASTURE WEANING

Weaning calves on pasture is an excellent way to keep them healthy, and minimize weaning cost and stress, because it keeps calves in a familiar environment and on their normal diet. Plus, if you're using cross-fence weaning, separation stress from their dams also is reduced. Weaned calves will get sick only if stressed. When I was with the University of Missouri, we pasture-weaned calves for 17 years with only two sick calves out of a total of 3,900 head. That kind of success makes weaning easy.

To be successful with pasture weaning, you must ensure you have appropriate pasture for weaning. For some ranchers, their standard weaning date is when they run out of grass. That won't work for pasture weaning.

The most desirable weaning pastures are those with high-quality, palatable forages, preferably something calves are used to eating. For spring-calving cows, you want something that makes fresh growth in late summer and fall.

In the drier western half of the U.S., the aftermath on irrigated hay fields may be the best weaning-pasture option. But, be alert to the bloat

potential using heavy alfalfa fields in the fall, as bloat risk increases with frost on the alfalfa.

Hay fields that are predominantly grass are adequate quality for weaned calves and safer to use. Some ranches use summer-planted winter annual forages for weaning. Mixtures of oats, awnless barley, and winter peas can work as standing or swathed forage.

Summer-rested rangeland makes good weaning forage for calves coming off rangeland. A site that's been lightly to moderately grazed in spring or early summer, and then rested for the remainder of the season, is preferable to a site that's accumulated forage all season. Spring grazing increases the amount of green forage carried through the season for higher quality, fall-weaning pasture.

Once your pasture planning for weaning is completed, the next step is deciding how to use it. In some pastures, not all the standing forage is calf-quality feed; you don't want to ask them to graze everything out there.

Particularly with stockpiled fescue, we usually only expect calves to graze about a third of the available forage, and then clean up the remainder with cows. If you push the calves too hard in hopes of utilizing all the forage, their gains will drop significantly. On the other hand, they can fully utilize a perennial ryegrass pasture and perform very well.

For calves used to electric fence and regular movement, we generally move calves to a new pasture strip every 3-4 days. With calves less used to moving, we start by letting them stay 7-10 days on the same strip. If the calves don't look full every day, it's time to move them.

Pasture weaning can take a lot of the work out of weaning calves in either temperate or rangeland environments. The keys are planning to have adequate calf-quality pasture to last through the weaning phase, and allocating it as needed to keep fresh feed in front of them every day.

Jim Gerrish
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FOCUS ON BVD

A two-day BVD seminar is set for Jan. 30-31, 2006, at the Adams Mark Hotel in Denver, CO. It will be held in conjunction with the 2006 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and Trade Show, Feb 1-4 at the Colorado Convention Center.

The seminar's sessions are broken into two parts — the first looking at the science behind

BVD, the second at producer concerns with the disease.

A day-long scientific program on Jan. 30 will focus on BVD diagnosis and surveillance. Included will be discussions on future BVD control strategies and eradication programs.

For more information go to www.nadc.ars.usda.gov/events/BVDV%202005/Index.asp.

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