

## Reducing Stress at Weaning Time

It's been said that weaning a calf from a protective, caring mother is like sending a kid to college. There's lots of bawling and pacing, but it's a separation that must be done. Much of the stress in weaned calves is due to the breaking of the instinctive maternal bond between mother and calf. That stress is never completely eliminated but better weaning options are proactive and quite effective in reducing weaning stress. These methods also increase the immunity and health status of weaned calves, which is often compromised, sometimes leading to chronic health problems and occasionally even feedlot death. Successful ranchers are always looking for strategic ways to reduce stress when the calf is weaned from its mother.

Abrupt separation, sometimes called truck-weaning, refers to separating cows from calves and then transporting bawling calves to another location. Calves and cows bawl and pace for days, often going through fences, getting onto roadways and causing all kinds of difficulties for nervous ranchers. Truck-weaned calves not only miss their mothers, but they must also become familiar with their new surroundings and start to eat different feeds. Sometimes they even have difficulty learning to drink water from a watering trough. Truck-weaned calves always have higher shrinkage by the time they get to their new home. This method is far from ideal, but is still quite common on many farms and ranches.

Gradual separation is an effort to slowly break the maternal bond between mother and calf during weaning. This may consist of putting cow-calf pairs in the same pen for a few days to a week. Once the calves get used to the feed bunks and waterers, the cows are moved out. The advantage to this method is that the calves are no longer in a strange place and even without their mothers present they start to nibble at their new grower diets. Other practical ways of successfully reducing stress while weaning calves consist of fence-line weaning and the newer two-step method.

Fence-line weaning is relatively simple, but requires sturdy fences and monitoring by the rancher. Cows and calves are kept in the same pasture but separated by a fence which prevents them from nursing, but allows visual contact. This method reduces stress on both sides of the fence because calves and cows are a lot calmer when they can see and "talk" with each other. They spend more time eating than those that experience total separation. After a few days of physical separation, calves can remain on familiar ground or pasture, while cows are the ones that are moved out. The University of California Davis showed fence-line calves gained 50 percent more weight the first two weeks after weaning than did truck-weaned calves. They also retained that weight advantage through at least 10 weeks post weaning. University of Idaho studies show that calves weaned while remaining in ear and eyeshot of their mothers are, on average, 25 pounds heavier after 10 weeks than calves that were physically removed from the site. Researchers attribute the superior weight gain to reduced stress.

Low-stress weaning, sometimes known as silent or quiet weaning, is a two-step method that appears to be quite appealing to the beef industry. Two-step means the calf stops nursing in step one and is then separated from their mother in step two. This method, developed at the University of Saskatchewan, outfits each nursing calf with a lightweight plastic nose flap that is inserted into the nostrils of the calf. This device allows calves to graze and drink water, but inhibits their ability to nurse their mothers. After

calves have worn the anti-sucking device for a few days (roughly one week) the nose flaps are removed and cows and calves are physically separated from each other. Field trials show that two-step calves bawl 85 percent less, walk 80 percent less and spent 25 percent more time eating when compared to traditionally weaned calves. These quiet, calm cattle are much easier on fences too. Quiet wean nose tags can be used again and again, making them very economical. Since calves have to be handled twice, once when inserting the nose flaps and once when they are removed, some say the extra handling is a drawback to this weaning method. Proponents suggest that calves usually need two shots of 4-way, so putting the calves through a chute twice is standard procedure. Those interested in learning more about QuietWean can find additional information at [www.quietwean.com](http://www.quietwean.com).

In addition to a good weaning and feeding plan, it's a good idea to set up a short pre-weaning program as well. It could start with a veterinarian sponsored vaccination program about three weeks before the calves are actually weaned. Don't add unnecessary stress by castrating, dehorning or branding calves at weaning. These practices should be completed at least three weeks before weaning and preferably prior to three months of age.

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