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Weaning Calves

There were quite a few calves weaned on the way to the Sale barn in July and August. Those would have been early weaned. Now coming to the close of our grazing season, not sure you can call this early weaning! But there are those that don't wean until November, so it might be earlier than normal. Here is some advice from our neighbors to the north, University of Nebraska:

Early weaning the calf significantly reduces the nutrient demands placed on the cow and more closely matches her requirements to nutrients supplied under drought or poor range conditions. Spring calving cows need to be in adequate body condition (BCS 5) prior to calving. Removing the calf early helps to improve body condition which has the potential to carry-over through the winter causing increase body condition at calving that is also evident during the next breeding season.

Early weaning of calves from 2-year-old, first-calf-females reduces the stress of nursing and raising a calf. As a result, these females will be in better body condition at calving that should result in cows that cycle and breed back earlier in the breeding season. For heifers bred for higher milk production, early weaning takes on greater importance. The greater the milk output, the greater the nutrient demands, the more difficult it is to keep young females in adequate body condition on a limited forage base, and the subsequent impact on reproduction.

Early weaned calves can be grown for a period of time before entering the feedlot or put back on grass pasture. They could also be grown for a short period of time (two to three weeks) then stepped up on a finishing diet. Calves that are on this "fast track" feeding program are very efficient at converting feed to gain (5.2 lb of feed dry matter per pound of gain) and a high proportion grade USDA average choice or better.

It is critical to get calves to eat as soon after being separated from their dam. If calves are creep fed before weaning, they will adapt quickly to being separated from their dams. Depending on the weight of the calf, the starter ration should be fed until the calves are consuming 4 to 5 pounds per animal per day (i.e., 1 to 1.5% of body weight). This usually takes 10 to 14 days.

Daily gain of calves during the period that they are nursing is usually 2.1 to 2.3 pounds. Calves that are weaned early should be managed to gain in this range as well. At first calves will have a low dry matter intake (DMI) for 3 to 14 days following weaning. During this time, dry matter intake will be in the range of 1 to 1.5% of body weight. Starter diets are energy-dense (i.e., 65% to 75% TDN), relatively rich in crude protein (i.e., 14% to 16%), and highly palatable. Diets for early weaned calves need to include high quality ingredients. Diets need to be dust-free and particle size of the ingredients needs to be similar so that calves cannot sort the diet components. Rations will need to include some level of forage to allow for proper rumen health. Silages and other fermented feeds should be introduced gradually into the diets of calves that are inexperienced with such feeds. Silages, while nutritious, should only be used in limited amounts in diets for recently-weaned calves. The high moisture level and the palatability characteristics of silage make it unlikely that calves will consume silage-based diets in amounts adequate to grow at targeted levels.

Most studies of early weaning have concluded that ownership of early-weaned calves need to be retained for some period of time after weaning in order to generate enough revenue to increase the profit potential of the cow-calf enterprise as compared to weaning calves at a more conventional age. Early-weaned calves weigh less at weaning compared to calves weaned at conventional ages and positive price slides are usually insufficient to offset the lesser body weight. Another reason not to sell the early-weaned calf directly after weaning is that these calves are more efficient at converting feed to gain than older calves.