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Managing Early Weaning

“Early” is a relative term, no matter if we are talking about when the daily alarm clock goes off or in the case of this article, weaning calves. There are several factors that point to the possibility of at least looking at the option to wean spring calving calves sooner than what is considered “normal” this year. Even with a recent market dip, calf prices are red hot. Hot summer temps and a drier period have caused rapid forage quality decline, forcing managers to look at options to maintain pasture quality and cow body condition scores. Lower cost of gains in the feedlot setting might mean putting calves on feed sooner. All of these factors make it seem like this might be a timely topic for today.

Weaning calves at less than 180 days of age is often considered early, but is a proven strategy to reduce forage demands significantly. While this can be beneficial from a forage base and cowherd management standpoint, it often brings more management for the calf side of this equation. Two primary issues need to be managed during the weaning/transition process. Calves need to learn how to eat during the starting phase and adapt to the environment of a feed yard. Secondly, the rumen needs to adapt to feedstuffs that may be vastly different from what the calf was eating on grass.

Animal handling and acclimation to more human interactions can have a big impact on weaning success. Proper animal handling techniques and investing time in the pens with newly weaned calves can go a long way. Walking calves up to the bunk right after feeding encourages feeding behaviors and acclimates them to handling in one action. This practice also makes it easier to find and treat sick calves. Investing time and effort to improve cattle handling skills pays dividends.

Using starting pens designed for the calf can help manage cattle behavior and minimize stress during receiving. Large pens with lots of room per head facilitate calves spending more time walking the fence and reduce opportunities to find feed and water. Dust problems during dry conditions become worse and the risk of spooking also increase. Wide, shallow pen designs keep calves close to feed and water, increasing their opportunities to encounter feed and water. Temporary panels can be used to reduce larger pens into smaller, more-manageable sizes. If movable bunks or tanks are utilized, consider placing them perpendicular to the fence line to force calf interaction with feed and water sources.

Water is a critically important nutrient that is often overlooked. Water quality and quantity issues can lead to health problems and reduced dry matter intake. Calves might not recognize water sources in a facility upon arrival. The process of working calves to fresh, clean, water sources can be critical in starting calves off on the right foot. Using additional water tanks so that calves can see open water can help make sure that water intake is not limited.

Diets for starting calves need to be palatable and nutrient dense. Long-stem prairie hay is the traditional roughage of choice, because calves recognize it as feed, it stimulates saliva production and makes a good transition for the rumen. However, prairie hay alone does not have enough energy or nutrients to support calf health and weight gains. Combining roughage with concentrate feeds helps calves achieve a positive energy balance more quickly. Don’t go cheap on this diet, it could be costlier in the long run.

Additional feed related management considerations include the following. Feed two times a day to stimulate appetite and offer more opportunities for calves to eat fresh feed. Avoid using self-feeders, including hay rings, to more accurately monitor intake. Being too aggressive with feed deliveries in the starting phase can lead to intake swings and increased health problems. Reasonable daily dry matter intake targets for calves would be 0.75 to 1% of bodyweight the first two days to about 2.5% of bodyweight after 14 days on feed. Avoid using high-moisture corn or supplements containing urea during the receiving phase.