

Over The Wire

A Beef Cattle E-Letter for Area Cattle Producers

Early Weaning Calves

By: Jim Church University of Idaho Extension

Why Now?

Cattle producers are facing some interesting times in the cattle business these days. Nationally the cow herd is as small as it has been in 60 years. Severe drought has caused many producers in the mid-west and south to liquidate herds. Hay supplies are critically low across the country, which is causing hay prices to skyrocket. In addition, corn prices are high due to the drought reducing production last year and the amount of corn being used to produce ethanol.

The cost of inputs are high but currently we are covering these costs with high calf prices.

With these high feed costs, it makes sense to maintain as much body condition on the cows as possible without having to buy expensive feed stuffs. One way to accomplish this is to wean early before cows lose too much body condition.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Greg Lardy, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist from North Dakota State University published a paper entitled, *Early Weaning Beef Calves*. In his paper he outlined advantages and disadvantages of early weaning which are listed below:

Advantages:

• Reduced nutrient demands on the cow herd and improved body condition.

- Reduced forage demand on the pasture. Dry cows eat less and the calves will not be grazing. Can reduce forage demand by 50%.
- Early weaning conserves forage resources for the cow herd.
- Reproductive performance of the cow herd may be improved if calves are weaned early.
- Cull cows can be marketed before the seasonal market lows.
- Quality grade of the calf may be improved, depending on management after weaning.

Disadvantages:

- Increased labor requirement.
- Requires facilities to background or feed calves.
- Higher nutritional requirements of weaned calves will require special rations.
- Increased focus on vaccinations and health program is required.

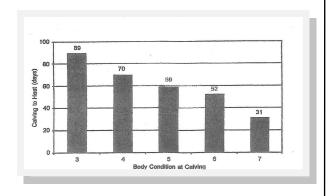
In another paper written by Utah State University Extension Specialists summarizing a research project they conducted on early weaning, (Clell Bagley, et al.,) the number one reason for early weaning is to help the nursing cows maintain body condition and reduce feed costs. In this study, the cowherd was divided into three groups; two groups of spring born calves were weaned the first of August and one group was weaned in October.

The average body weight gained by cows that had the calves weaned early was 33.1 pounds and their body condition score improved from 4.9 to 5.4.

The cows that had their calves weaned in October showed an average loss of 7.9 pounds and their body condition score stayed the same. The average difference in net pounds of body weight was 41 pounds between the early weaned versus the later weaned cows. This is equal to one half of a body condition score.

Does Cow Body Condition Really Matter?

Yes, definitely. Clay Mathis and Manny Encinias, Extension Livestock Specialists from New Mexico State University summarized data developed by Dr. Houghton, et al., in a bulletin entitled, *Early Weaning Beef Calves*. The data showed the effect of body condition at calving on postpartum anestrus. In other words, how long it took cows to return to estrus after calving. The table below outlines the results:



Effect of body condition at calving on postpartum anestrus duration. (Houghton et al., 1990, Mathis et al., New Mexico State, 2010)

As you can see by the data, cows that are a condition score 3 at calving will take 89 days to return to estrus, while a cow with a condition score of 5 at calving will take 59 days to return to estrus.

How does this relate to early weaning? If you wean early in the fall and are able to maintain or gain body condition while still on fall pasture, it is much cheaper than letting a cow lose a body condition score or two and then trying to gain it back by feeding her in the winter prior to calving. On average it takes 75—100 pounds of body weight to gain a body condition score.

Fall calving cows lose a great deal of body condition over the winter while nursing a calf. Early

weaning may not be as critical because the cows have the summer grazing period to gain body condition prior to calving. However, if feed quality is low or if feed supply is limited, it may pay to wean fall calves early.

How Old Should the Calves be to Early Wean?

Calves can be weaned as early as six weeks of age but most beef producers wanting to early wean should consider weaning at 4 to 5 months of age. At this age the calf is old enough to do well in a drylot or on a high quality pasture without a great deal of extra care. This also allows enough time to provide the advantages to the cows.



Clip art courtesy of American Angus Association.

Does It Pay?

In the Utah State University study conducted by Bagley et al., where they divided the calves into three groups; one group early weaned and fed in a drylot; one early weaned and turned out on good quality pasture; and the third group left on the cows until the normal weaning date of October. The weight gains for all three groups of calves showed no statistically significant difference.

The cows in the study were grazing native meadow pastures, and the researchers indicated that the summer pasture was adequate but the feed was limited in late summer. They did acknowledge that the limitation was mild.

The big difference they noticed was in the body

condition of the cows as was mentioned earlier in this letter.

There conclusion from this study was that the decision to wean early should be placed on the availability and cost of the feed that will be fed to the early weaned calves, quality and quantity of pasture forage if the calves are left on the cows and the benefit to the dams in regards to body condition saved if the calves are weaned early.

In our area, spring born calves grazing local pastures have a very difficult time meeting their nutrient requirements eating the dried up pasture grasses in August and September. I think in our region, there is a need to look at the performance of calves weaned early and fed good quality feed in a drylot versus leaving them on the cows.

So does it pay? Well it looks like the answer is it depends.

Summary:

It appears that early weaning should be considered when range or pasture forages are short in supply and low in quality. The early weaned calves will need to be fed high quality feeds that will allow them to grow adequately. This forage will have to be competitively priced.

In addition, the research shows that the biggest advantage of weaning calves early is the benefit it provides in maintaining cow body condition. If cows are losing body condition each year and it is causing reproduction problems. Early weaning should be used.

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References:

Bagley, Clell V., Stenquist, Norris J., and Snyder, Donald L., Early Weaning Of Calves May Be Economical. Utah State University Extension Animal Health Fact Sheet #AH/Beef/14. July 1997.

Lardy, Greg., Early Weaning Beef Calves. North Dakota State University Research Extension Center Annual Report, 2002.

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