



Early Weaning Calves Options

UW Extension Livestock Focus Team

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This summer's hot and recently very dry weather conditions, combined with the depleted forage supply due to this past years winter kill, has many cow-calf producers examining short pasture condition strategies. Reduced pasture supplies often encourage producers to examine supplemental feeding alternatives or early weaning management. This year's higher than seasonal average hay prices suggest producers consider early weaning calves.

Early weaning beef calves can stretch the grazing of existing supplies. Dry and gestating beef cows can utilize lower quality forages as the nutrient needs, such as protein and energy, are lower in relation to the demand to support lactation. Nutrient levels found in higher quality forages may exceed the cow's requirement during this phase of production allowing use of lower quality feedstuffs.

Typically Wisconsin producers wean calves at six (6) to eight (8) months of age; and since most Wisconsin calves are born in March-May the majority of beef calves are in the 100-150 days of age range in August. Research and the experience of other producers have shown that with good management one can successfully wean calves of this age.

SITUATIONS WHEN EARLY WEANING SHOULD BE CONSIDERED

- ✓ **Short pastures**
- ✓ **Expensive hay supplies**
- ✓ **High calf prices**
- ✓ **Cows in thin body condition**
- ✓ **Hot weather that makes cool-season grass species go dormant**
- ✓ **Temperature is more constant resulting in less health problems**
- ✓ **Producer has cows to cull and the market is strong**
- ✓ **Willing buyers for pre-conditioned weaned calves**

In the Upper Midwest many herd managers would find themselves operating this year in one or more of above categories. If you decide to early wean calves there are numerous methods to successfully early wean calves. One receiving recent attention is “Across the Fence” or “Fenceline” method of weaning. With this method the cows and calves are separated by only a fence and can remain in visual contact with each other. This has been shown to reduce stress on both the cow and calf since they can see and smell each other. If possible it is better to move the cows to an adjacent space and leave the calves in their current pasture since they know boundaries, water locations, and remain on a familiar forage resource. Calves and cows although separated will often lie down next to each other while still on opposite sides of the fence. There will also be less dust in the calf area with this method potentially reducing the risk for respiratory disease. Usually within two to four days cows and calves can be relocated to other areas.

During the weaning transition, it is important the feed or forages offered be palatable and balanced to meet the nutritional requirements of these calves during this period of low intake. Additionally, feed should be kept fresh and daily feeding or stirring the feed in the bunk may assist calves find the feed. Fermented feeds such as corn silage should be avoided immediately following weaning as calves are not acclimated to these feedsuffs, but they can be offered at low levels a few days following weaning and slowly increased. Good quality grass or grass/legume mix hay is ideal as the forage source for drylot weaning. Avoid high quality legume hays as they may result in scouring and increase the risk of dehydration. Feed bunks should be placed such that the animals have to walk around them if they desire to pace the fenceline. This “stumbling over the feeder” concept will help calves to locate the feed as opposed to putting it in an area that they do not visit frequently. Gradually introduce starch containing feedstuffs by limiting the amount of grain offered to 1-2 lbs for the first 2-3 days. Begin to increase the amount fed per head giving a few days between each increase and monitor calves for eating and health related disorders. Provide fresh, clean water with ample drinking space. For commercially available rations, one should follow the label directions. If fountains are utilized, placing a tank in the weaning area the first few days post-weaning may reduce dehydration until they learn how to drink from the fountain. Utilization of a tank waterer the first few days post-weaning also allows for delivery of electrolytes if warranted.

For calves to be sold immediately as feeders, limit grain consumption as calf buyers may bid less for calves that appear over conditioned or “fleshy”. If you are backgrounding the calves for sale in the spring you may also limit daily grain consumption so calves can be switched more economically to a roughage based ration. Typically, grain is limited to not more than five pounds for under these situations.

Calves you plan to finish or feed to slaughter weight can be managed under several options. In typical years we see a drop in fed cattle prices in late spring in addition to a widening of the Choice-Select spread as more finished cattle begin to arrive at the markets. Producers calving early, January –March have an opportunity to push calves on high-energy rations following weaning and market them at 12-14 month olds before prices decline. For producers with later born spring calves, April-June, placing the newly weaned calves on a higher roughage ration leading to lower gains, referred to as backgrounding, during the winter may be a better option if forage sources are inexpensive. Calves can then be sold as feeders in the spring for grazing operations, sold as heavy feeders, or offered a high energy ration to finish the calves for expected marketing in September-November.

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