

## The Process of Weaning

The time of year is here for many cattle farmers when it comes to weaning their fall calves. While everyone might have a tried-and-true method, the weaning process can significantly impact future productivity for each calf. Weaning is considered one of the most stressful periods for the calf as well as the cow. The natural weaning process occurs in calves ages 7 to 14 months. In most domestic operations, weaning occurs anywhere from 6-9 months for beef cattle. Weaning between 6 and 8 months of age allows the cow to build back body condition before calving while also reducing forage consumption. A lactating cow will eat .5% more of its body weight in dry matter. This percentage might seem small, but it adds up quickly if you have multiple cows in a herd.

Beef calves experience two major stressors when being weaned: removal of the cow and removal of their primary source of nutrition (milk). Reducing stress will help promote optimal performance post-weaning. Stress-induced during the weaning process can make calves more susceptible to different infectious diseases as well as reduce their feed and water intake. Calves are most susceptible to transmitting shipping fever (Bovine Respiratory Disease) when they are 6-8 months of age. It can help to vaccinate calves before they are stressed through weaning. This can help ensure the antibodies are in place before calves enter the feedlot and are around other cattle.

There are several things to consider before beginning the weaning process. Consider the timing for shipment, intermingling with new animals, and introduction to new facilities. Calves should be weaned at least 30-45 days before sale or shipment to promote positive health and performance. Weather is also a limiting factor in the amount of stress placed on a newly-weaned calf. If possible, try to find a window of 3-4 good weather days for the weaning process. Try to acclimate calves to the pasture or facility that they will be placed in following the weaning process, before they are weaned. Introducing calves to new watering or feeding devices will help ensure they are eating and drinking enough during and after weaning.

There are a few common methods when it comes to weaning. The most traditional method is the simplest and least management-intensive option, abruptly separating the calves and cows from all physical, visual, and sometimes auditory contact. Calves are typically moved to a new environment. This is referred to as a one-step method. Studies show that even allowing the calves to still have auditory contact with the cows have better post-wean performance than those who do not. Calves that could hear their dam experienced half of the number of stressful days that the calves who could not. With the abrupt separation method, the producer has the option to sell calves almost immediately. Calves weaned in this method can often experience high shrink loss, up to 7-9% of body weight.

Fenceline weaning is a two-step method, that reduces the amount of stress placed on the cows and calves at once. Fenceline weaning involves separating calves and cows through opposite sides of a fenceline while allowing them to have contact for a period (around one

week). It is important to make sure they cannot nurse through the fence. Fencing needs to be in good condition as cows and calves might try to break through to connect. This method is less stressful as it allows calves to adjust to a new environment while still being able to see and hear the dam. To help reduce stress even more, you can place the calves and cows in the pasture that the calves will be weaned in for a few days. This will make the pasture more familiar to the new space once the cows are removed. To ensure calves are getting enough water and feed, you can place a yearling heifer or dry cow in the pasture with the calves to help guide them. Fenceline separation is a way to reduce stress before the complete removal of the dam.

Two-stage weaning is a method where a temporary device such as a nose flap is placed on the calf while allowing calves to remain with the dams. The nose flap allows the calf to drink water and graze but prevents them from nursing. In this method, collect weaning weights when the device is applied. The second stage of this method begins at 10-14 days of wearing the device. The device is then removed, and the calf is separated from the dam. Two-step methods are considered less stressful for the calves as they learn new nutrition while still being near their dam. The drawback is the purchase of the flaps and the labor involved in placing them and removing them. Calves will then need to learn how to graze without the flaps, which takes a period of adjustment.

No matter what method of weaning you prefer, it is important to always have a plan before you begin. The weight at which you begin weaning out will play a factor in the success of your weaning. Calves and cows when stressed using a one-step weaning method, often spend more time pacing or walking a fence line searching for each other. This can contribute to weight loss for both the calves and cows. Two-step methods tend to reduce the amount of pacing while the calves are more likely to adequately eat and drink. Weaning is ultimately a preference based on many factors such as your facility capabilities and labor. It is important to acknowledge that no matter how you wean calves, it is a stressful period for the calves and cows. Reducing that stress in any way can help the performance and economic ability of your herd.

### Upcoming Events

Junior Fair Beef BBQ- September 7<sup>th</sup> at the Ohio Valley Career and Technical Center from 4:30-7:00pm. Tickets can be purchased in advance at the Extension Office or purchased on the day of the event.

Farm Science Review- September 19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> at the Molly Caren Agricultural Center in London, Ohio. Tickets can be purchased in advance at the Extension office for \$10. Tickets may also be purchased at the gate for \$15. Children 5 and under are free for this event.

For those needing to take the ODA Pesticide Exam, exams are being held at the Ohio Valley Career and Technical Center. The next examination date available is October 4<sup>th</sup>. Online registration is required.