Feeding and Managing Early Weaned Calves

Weaning is our opportunity as cattle producers to prepare calves for the next phase of the beef production cycle. Regardless of if it is an early-weaned calf (less than 180 days of age), or an older calf. The goal of weaning is to produce a healthy calf that is comfortable without its dam, readily consumes feed and has successfully acclimated to a new environment. The primary barriers to this goal are the stressors experienced during weaning which are: 1) maternal separation 2) a new environment 3) unfamiliar feedstuffs and 4) reduced immune function resulting from the stressors mentioned before. There are several different management practices that may be implemented on an operation, depending on the resources available to prepare calves more effectively for weaning.

The first management practice would be to establish a herd health program. Producers should consult their veterinarian and develop a herd health program that includes a vaccination program and a treatment plan for calves that become sick. A sound vaccination program prepares calves for disease exposure. While a treatment plan allows producers to have the supplies and pharmaceuticals on hand to treat illness in newly weaned calves immediately. The second management practice would be to not add additional stressors. It is well established that stress significantly impacts cattle health and well-being, reduces animal performance, and increases disease susceptibility. Castration, dehorning, and branding are all stressors that can add to the stress of weaning. These tasks should be completed well in advance of weaning (a minimum of 3 weeks is typically recommended).

The third is to clean the pens properly. If calves are going to be weaned in a drylot, remove the previous year’s manure, and start with a clean pen. Simply put; dust equals increased respiratory pulls. Cleaning the pen prior to weaning minimizes dust and allows pens to drain better should conditions become wet. For your fourth management practice, place feed bunks and water tanks along and perpendicular to fences. One of the typical behaviors associated with newly weaned calves is fence walking. Fence-walking can be made more productive by placing feed bunks or water tanks along the perimeter of the weaning area. This allows calves to come in contact with feedstuffs and water sources.

The fifth management practice is to provide access to the weaning pen or pasture. When possible, providing cows and calves access to the weaning area for a few days/weeks prior to weaning allows calves to become accustomed to the weaning area with the dam. This reduces the additional stress of an environment change on calves following weaning. If possible, move the cows not the calves. Once both cows and calves have become accustomed to the weaning pen or pasture, remove the cows from the area, leaving the calves in the familiar area. The sixth practice is to provide fenceline contact if practical. Research indicates that allowing fenceline contact between cows and calves for 7 days after separation reduces behavioral stress and minimizes post-weaning weight loss. Fences should be sturdy and tight enough that calves cannot nurse. If
fenceline contact is not practical, then cows should be moved to a location where they cannot hear calves. Don’t become a source of stress. Sorting cows and calves on weaning day can be difficult especially when facilities are limited or poorly designed. However, sorting cows and calves doesn’t have to be difficult.

Finally, help calves adjust to new feedstuffs. One of the essential transitions a calf must make during weaning is the transition from mother’s milk and grazed forage to grazed forage and supplement, hay and supplement, or a ration containing novel feeds delivered in a bunk. Feeding both cows and calves a small amount of the supplement or weaning ration prior to weaning, in the weaning pen or pasture can be used to help acclimate calves to both the feeds and the environment. Additionally, feed intake of weaned calves is often low (1.0 to 1.5 % of bodyweight, dry basis) immediately following weaning. Calves also have relatively high nutrient requirements. Thus, the weaning diet must be nutrient dense to meet the nutrient requirements of the calves at the expected intakes previously mentioned.

Thanks to Justin Waggoner for sharing information related to feeding and managing early weaned calves, and for further information, contact me at any Post Rock Extension District Offices in Beloit, Lincoln, Mankato, Osborne or Smith Center.

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