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1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation
Bagley, Clell V.; Stenquist, Norris J.; and Snyder, Donald L., "Early weaning of Calves may be Economical (Summary)" (1997). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 93.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/93

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Animal Health Fact Sheet

EARLY WEANING OF CALVES MAY BE ECONOMICAL (SUMMARY)

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July 1997 AH/Beef/15

In order to evaluate the problems and benefits of early weaning, a trial (funded by the Utah Department of Agriculture) was conducted with the Utah State University beef herd during the summer of 1992. We wondered about the effects on health and weight gains of the calves and the body condition of their dams; would this be a realistic procedure and economically feasible?

We found that early weaning worked well under our conditions, with few, if any, extra problems. It is a viable alternative for producers and our data indicate that it could be economically worthwhile in some situations.

The herd used for the study was grazed in divided, native meadow pastures in Cache Valley. There was adequate feed for early summer, but by late summer feed was limited. However, this limitation was mild compared to what many beef herds would experience in a serious drought situation. The calves were born in March and April and were pastured with their dams, all together. On August 10, one-third of the calves was weaned and placed in drylot (Group 1). Another one-third (Group 2) was weaned and also placed in drylot, but after 3 days they were
allowed access to an excellent planted pasture. The remaining third (Group 3) were not weaned until October 19. The final weights were taken on November 16 to allow Group 3 a 4-week period to adjust for weaning stress, in order to provide a more accurate comparison with those weaned early.

The primary disease problem after weaning in all three groups was bovine respiratory disease and 9.1% of the calves were treated individually for it. The average calf age at early weaning was almost 5 months (148.2 days). Weaning calves at 35 to 60 days, as has been done in some trials, may require more care and a higher rate of treatment.

There was no statistically significant difference in the weight gains of the three groups of calves. This would indicate that for weight gain the method of management was not very important. The decision of when to wean should be based on feed economics and the potential benefit to the dams of early weaning.

Between the groups of cows there was a significant weight difference. The nursing cows lost an average of 7.9 pounds and the cows in the early weaned groups gained an average of 33.1 pounds for the August to October weigh period. A total net difference of 41 pounds was realized.

Early weaning did not result in an increased rate of illness nor in a lack of gain. Early weaning can have a beneficial effect on the dams.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/DF/07-97)