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Animal Health
Fact Sheet



MANAGEMENT FOR WEANING HEALTHY, MARKETABLE CALVES

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Weaning is an extremely stressful time for beef calves and involves the potential for severe economic loss. The most common problems usually involve respiratory and/or digestive diseases. Weaned calves should be retained for 3–6 weeks after weaning. Some cow/calf operations do not have the feed and facilities to effectively manage newly weaned calves. In this case, arrangements should be made to move these calves to a backgrounding operation immediately after weaning for that 3–6 week period of adaptation.

Four management principles are essential for successful weaning and they must all be applied. These include: stress reduction, balanced and adequate nutrition, a monitored parasite control program and an immunization program.

STRESS REDUCTION

A basic method to reduce weaning stress is to select and perform some procedures prior to weaning, while the calves are still on their dams. For example, dehorning and castration are usually best done at 1–3 months of age. If it cannot be done at that stage it should be done at 3–6 weeks prior to or 3–6 weeks after weaning.

If the days are warm at weaning, work the cattle early in the morning and try to have most of the moving and handling done by noon or early afternoon. Cattle tend to hold body heat even when the air temperature is cooling off in the evening and this increased temperature is a stress to them. If the corrals to be used are dusty, wet them down the night before to eliminate dust inhalation and inflammation of the respiratory tract. Calves should be quickly and quietly separated from their dams without beating and fatiguing them. For sorting, some producers use an alleyway with separation gates that can be worked from an elevated platform above the chute. It is best to either pen the weaned calves right next to their dams, just through a good fence, or to have them far enough apart that they cannot hear the bawling from one another.

One of the most critical factors in weaning is getting calves started on water soon. Allow a small amount of water to run continuously to help get the calves attention and draw them to it. The trough should be fitted with an overflow tube so water doesn't puddle in the corral and create a site for the spread of coccidiosis.

When transporting calves, guard against severe fatigue and their inhalation of fumes from the exhaust pipes of the truck, or ammonia fumes from urine. If these are prevented, the shipping itself should be of minor impact.

NUTRITION

Calves should be weaned before energy and protein level of the feed becomes inadequate for reasonable calf gains. Early weaning (120–150 days) is a good practice when feed is limited. This will allow the calves to maintain a high rate of growth and also prepare the cows with improved body condition for winter. Feed consumption is reduced in newly weaned calves so high quality feed should be provided for them. The calves' status in regard to the micro-elements, such as copper, zinc, etc., must also be considered. A deficiency of these elements can lead to increased rates of illness and supplementation is beneficial for some grazing areas. Feeding the calves a small amount of dry hay for a few days prior to weaning will aid their rate of adaptation later because they will have watched the cows eat it and also will have tasted it themselves.

Pasture is adequate in some areas so the calves can be separated from their dams and turned into a good quality pasture right next to the dams. This system involves very little stress and calves have gained well with minimal illness rates using this method. But it is essential to have good feed and an excellent fence.

Balanced and adequate nutrition after weaning is a key principle whether the calves are left on pasture or put into drylot. In a drylot, it is helpful to feed grass hay for a couple days to allow the calves time to begin to adapt. But, if they are left just on this hay, gains will be seriously reduced. At the first feeding in the drylot, some of the grass hay can be hung out through the manger to entice the calves to try it. If they have been fed similar hay just prior to weaning, they will usually begin to feed readily. By the next day, the drylot ration (moderate energy level) can begin to be fed along with the grass hay. The grass hay is gradually reduced and finally eliminated unless there is a need to keep some in the ration to reduce bloat. Place the feed bunks around the perimeter of the pen so the calves will find them as they are walking and bawling. Feed at least twice a day to provide fresh feed and entice them to come and eat. Frequent feeding also provides the opportunity to observe calves which are not eating so they can be evaluated for illness.

PARASITE MONITORING AND CONTROL

Parasite burdens can affect performance as well as reduce the immune system's ability to respond adequately. The level of parasitism varies, so it is important to monitor, and if needed, control both external and internal parasites at weaning.

IMMUNIZATION PROGRAM

Vaccination should be viewed as an aid, not as a guarantee of health. Vaccines should almost always be given to protect calves against the clostridial diseases (Blackleg, Malignant Edema, Enterotoxemia, etc.) and the respiratory disease viruses (IBR, PI3, BVD, and BRSV). These latter viral products may be killed, modified live or attenuated/altered and it is important to understand the differences for their proper use. Other vaccines which should be considered for use in special situations include Pasteurella, Hemophilus, and Brucellosis. The specific times for vaccination may include calthood (1–3 months of age), prior to weaning (3–6 weeks), weaning and postweaning. Remember that vaccines which call for a second (booster) dose will usually not stimulate a protective level of immunity until 10–14 days after that second injection. It is wise to use your veterinarian in making product and schedule decisions so these fit your specific situation and calendar. Always handle vaccines properly and administer in the neck area.

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