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## Rethink Weaning

September ushers in the beginning of fall, and for cow-calf producers, thoughts of weaning. For many, weaning is a tradition that has been followed for years or even generations. No matter how you wean, there will be some stress on the calf. However, there are several things that can be implemented to reduce stress. Certainly, weaning itself is a stress as the cow/calf bond is severed but there are ways to minimize the stress as we will discuss later. Other stressors include nutrition, environment and disease which can also be minimized.

### Nutrition

Typically calves undergo a major change in diet at weaning especially if they are abruptly weaned into a dry lot off pasture. Of course weaning eliminates milk from the diet but 6 month old calves are consuming substantial amounts of grass. Weaning strategies that leave calves on pasture where feed is familiar will minimize nutritional stress. If you have to wean into a dry lot, calves should be creep fed prior to weaning so that the post weaning feed is not new. The other major cause of nutritional stress is that freshly weaned calves do not eat well, especially if they are abruptly weaned. Alternative weaning strategies that minimize the social stress associated with weaning will decrease nutritional stress also.

### Environment

Environmental stress includes weather changes, pen condition and dust. Fluctuating temperature are hard on calves especially if they are already stressed. Weaning later in the fall increases the likelihood of temperature swings from warm days and cold nights. Consider weaning earlier in the fall to avoid temperature fluctuations and take advantage of weaning onto green grass. If facing adverse weather it may be better to reschedule weaning rather than weaning on a specific date. If using a dry lot make sure pens are in good shape and control dust or mud.

### Disease

The other stresses a calf faces at weaning can depress the immune system leading to some disease stress. Vaccinating calves prior to weaning, as well as castrating and dehorning (physical stress) will help to keep calves healthy.

### Weaning or Social stress

Typically, weaning disrupts the calves' social structure, which is very stressful. Alternative weaning programs decrease this stress by gradually transitioning the calf.

Fenceline weaning separates the calf from the cow and the source of milk but allows some social interaction. Generally it is better to leave

the calves in their original pasture that they are familiar with and move the cows to an adjacent pasture. Studies have shown that calves will have decreased sickness and increase in weight gain if fenceline weaned.

Two-stage weaning is similar to fenceline in that nursing is prevented while allowing social interaction. A plastic nose flap is used to prevent nursing while the calf is left with the cow. This requires running the calves through the chute twice to apply and remove the flap but calves will generally do better compared to either abrupt or fenceline weaning. This method allows the calf to gradually separate itself from the cow. Nose flaps should only be left in for 5-7 days to prevent sores from developing in the calf's nose.

Work with your veterinarian, extension specialist and nutritionist to develop the best weaning program for your operation. Minimizing stress will improve health and performance and allow you to produce high quality calves that are ready to transition to the next production phase.

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