

News column for use week of August 22, 2022  
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### **Early Weaning, Should this be a Consideration**

Traditionally, calves are weaned at 6 to 7 months of age. In a typical spring calving herd, this usually means late September to early November. However, during drought, forage is generally limiting, and early weaning should be considered a management tool. Time of weaning will have an impact on cow and calf performance as well as health and productivity of pasture or native range. Early weaning is typically defined as weaning before calves are 150 days of age. In extreme cases, calves may be weaned at 45 days of age, but it is more common for early weaned calves to be over 90 days of age. Weaning March and April-born calves in late July or early August is generally preferable to earlier time frames.

Producers might consider early weaning only a portion of the herd. With this management plan, the logical first choice of candidates for early weaning is cows nursing their first or second calves. These younger cows have nutrient requirements for growth in addition to maintenance and lactation. By removing the demands of lactation on nutrient requirements, growth and performance will receive a greater proportion of the nutrients available. Producers may also consider early weaning for cows that are in thin or poor condition.

Once weaning has occurred the cow can be maintained on poor quality forage and little to no supplementation as there is no demand for lactation. Following weaning, dry cows will eat less forage than lactating cows, further reducing the demand placed on pastures. Higher quality feed, which could be in limited supply, can be reserved for a rapidly growing calf. Early weaned calves should consume 2.75% to 3.25% of their body weight in dry feed daily. A starter diet should include feeds that the calves are familiar with like hay. The starter diet should also include highly palatable feeds such as dried distiller grains. Feeds such as corn silage are great for growing cattle but tend to turn calves off from eating. The fermented odor and flavor of these feeds can cause feed aversion in freshly weaned calves.

Certain management practices will help with maintaining the early weaned calves for increased performance and growth. Waterers and feed bunks should be placed along the fenceline. Since freshly weaned calves tend to walk the fenceline, placement of key for calves to find feed and water easily. On top of proper nutrition and good facilities, there are special health requirements to take into consideration. Like proper vaccination protocol and making sure to monitor calves daily for symptoms of respiratory disease, digestive disturbances, scours, coccidiosis, and intake levels.

#### **Advantages**

**Improved cow body condition:** by weaning early, the cow's nutrient requirements for lactation are eliminated and cows are able to maintain or increase body condition prior to the fall and winter-feeding period.

**Improved calf performance:** by weaning early and providing a highly nutritious diet, calves can reach their growth potential. Early weaning, coupled with feeding a high concentrate diet, has resulted in increased quality grades at slaughter, as seen by research conducted at several different universities.

**Improved pregnancy rates:** limited feed resources can negatively impact reproductive performance and weaning before or during the breeding season can allow cows a greater

opportunity to rebreed in an optimum time frame and an increase in pregnancy rate can be expected.

Improved forage availability for the cow: early weaning reduces the cows dry matter intake and eliminates the demand for the forage from the calf.

**Disadvantages**

Increased attention to management is required: early weaning requires greater attention to proper health, nutrition, and management practices.

Increased cash costs: instead of pasture and their mother's milk, early weaned calves will eat high-quality grains, hays, protein supplements and/or commercially prepared feeds which results in increased cash costs.