

Bluestem Breezes
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Weaning Calves

Weaning calves is a critical time for the cow-calf operator. This week, K-State Beef Systems Specialist Justin Waggoner discusses the art of a successful weaning program:

Weaning is our opportunity as cattle producers to prepare calves for the next phase of the beef production cycle. Weaning represents a transition and how well we prepare calves for the transition is essential to the outcome.

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. One of the essential transitions a calf has to 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 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. Unfortunately, the dry feeds calves are often most familiar with (typically grass hays) are not necessarily nutrient dense. At the K-State Agriculture Research Center in Hays, a feeding management protocol for weaning calves has been developed that works well for transitioning weaned calves to a total mixed ration.

Essentially, high-quality grass hay and the weaning ration are offered each at 0.5% of the calves' current bodyweight, dry basis, on the day of weaning. The weaning ration is placed in the bottom of the bunk and the hay is placed on top. The amount of the weaning ration is steadily increased, while the amount of hay offered remains constant. In addition, on day 4 the hay is placed on the bottom of the bunk. Over a period of 7-10 days the dry intake of the calves is steadily increased and should reach approximately 2.2-2.5% of the calves' bodyweight by 10-14 days following weaning.

The weaning feed management protocol and other cow-calf information is available by contacting the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.