

News Column

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WEANING CALVES

If I knew then what I know now.....

There are lots of ways that people finish this sentence, but the point is usually to be nicer, work harder, treat your parents better, or something along those lines. So, I think you'll be surprised by how I finish that sentence.

If I knew then what I know now,....I would have made life a lot more miserable for my dad. Yep. I would have questioned him more. I would have challenged him more. I would have made him miserable with the things I wanted/needed to change in our farming operation.

Sorry Dad, but we didn't have a clue when it came to weaning calves. Yes, we knew to separate them from their mothers to wean them, but that was about it. We didn't pre-condition. We didn't fence-line wean. We didn't put the bunks around the edges so the calves would find them. We didn't even start them on grass hay like we've been taught to do for years.

OK, we sort of, might have, maybe fence-line weaned. But we didn't do it intentionally and we did it backwards. At the McClure farm everything got hauled home from pastures that were mostly 10 to 15 miles from home. Immediately upon arriving back at home base, the cows were dumped in the south pasture and the calves were unloaded in the big lot down by the barn. If all went well, the calves wouldn't be out with the cows by morning.

The weaning ration wasn't the worst thing in the world. It was a high dollar, high fiber feed containing a lot of ground up corn cobs, and all the other nutrients needed for a properly

balanced diet. But, the problem was that the calves had never seen it, smelled it, or tasted it before. We should have had some dry grass hay in the bunk so they could chew on something they knew while accidentally consuming the fancy ration too.

Oh, and those bunks. Right in the middle of the pen, all in a row.

Weaning recommendations from the experts include:

- Establish a herd health program that includes completing vaccinations prior to weaning and having herd health products on hand in case treatment for an illness is needed..
- Don't add additional stressors at weaning time. Castration and dehorning should be completed at least three weeks prior to weaning.
- Clean pens and remove the previous year's manure before dumping new calves in the weaning pen. Cleaning pens will minimize dust and cut down on respiratory problems and will also allow for better drainage, keeping pens dryer during wet periods.
- Place feed bunks and water tanks along and perpendicular to fence lines. Newly weaned calves tend to walk the fence and they are more likely to find and eat feed if they accidentally bump into feed bunks while fence walking. The same concept applies to water.
- Fence-line wean if you can. Ideally, cows and calves will both have access to large weaning pens prior to weaning. If they are familiar with the pen, they will at least be able to find the water, and they won't be as stressed as they would be if dropped into unfamiliar surroundings.
- If possible, move cows instead of calves. Try setting up a small weaning pasture next to a tighter pen that might normally be your weaning pen. Shut the cows in the tighter pen during weaning and let the calves have the pasture. This will give the calves a familiar

food source (grass), and should lead to a smoother weaning process.

- Help calves adjust to new feedstuffs. If possible, feed a small amount of the weaning diet to both cows and calves for a few days prior to weaning. Newly weaned calves will only consume about 1% to 1.5% of body weight on a dry basis. Give them 0.5% hay and 0.5% weaning ration on day one, then gradually increase the weaning diet while holding the grass hay at 0.5% of body weight. Intake should reach 2.5% to 2.5% of body weight by 10-14 days post-weaning.
- The protocol at the Hays Research Station calls for placing the weaning diet in the bottom of the bunk and the hay on top for the first three days, then on day four put the hay at the bottom and the weaning diet on top.

Give these ideas a try and I think you'll be impressed with the results.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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