

News Column

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For Release 05/10/19  
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## EARLY WEANING TO IMPROVE COW CONDITION

I know. My timing seems a little off. You just hauled cows and calves to pasture, and I'm already thinking about weaning those calves. Why talk about weaning this early in the season?

I'm not suggesting that you actually wean spring calves this early in May. Instead, I just want to plant the seed. If you start thinking about it now, maybe you'll get your mind wrapped around the idea by mid-August or early September.

Having just come through one of the more difficult winters some of us have experienced, too many cows are in poorer condition than we would like. Yes, they will likely put on considerable weight early in the pasture season, but I expect that we will still be seeing the effects of the tough 2019 winter when calving season rolls around in 2020. I anticipate more open cows and later born calves next winter and spring.

Weaning earlier than normal is a way to get cows back into condition and improve their body condition score going into winter. If cows are in better shape going into winter, they will also be in better shape after calving and when they are turned out to pasture the next spring.

The improvement in cows body condition score should be apparent if you wean calves in late summer or early fall instead of late fall or early winter. Weaning calves earlier reduces the nutritional demand on cows by 25-30%. This effectively means that nutrition that was going into feeding her calf can now go toward improving the cow's body condition.

Early weaning is by no means a new idea. It was about 1986 when my dad and I weaned a set of calves in mid-September. Our operation consisted of about 125 cows in five pastures, each holding just 25 cows and their calves. We only weaned the calves in one pasture that year.

We obviously weren't conducting a research trial, and I don't have an literature to site, but I'm confident that group of 25 cows would have scored at least one body condition score above their peers by the first of December.

Come weaning time for the rest of the cows, and throughout the winter, the group of early weaned cows were easy to detect just by observing their body condition. They were in better shape throughout the winter and were still in good shape when they went to grass the following spring.

Logic would suggest that our group of early weaned cows would breed back quicker the following spring because of their improved body condition. I believe that to be correct, and I have always remembered it that way, but it was honestly a lot of years ago and we never had any hard data.

Having no data of my own to back up my theory that cows will breed back better in the spring if calves are weaned earlier, I turned to the internet for help. I quickly found a South Dakota study where calves were weaned either September 14 or October 23, and pregnancy rates evaluated the following spring.

In the South Dakota study – where nutrition was limited to mimic a dry summer or a difficult winter – pregnancy rates after a 21 day A.I. period were 70% for the early weaned group and 35% for the later weaned group.

I think it is important to note that nutrition was limited in that study, resulting in a dramatic difference in early pregnancy rate. Nonetheless, I would expect improved pregnancy

rates, even in a good year, and that's why I continue to promote earlier weaning.

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](mailto:gmcclure@ksu.edu).

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