

News Column

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FENCE-LINE WEANING

Weaning time on the McClure farm was generally a disaster. Pens were never ready. We were always in a hurry. Cows and calves were hard to catch. And it was noisy, with bawling calves wanting their mommas. I'd really like a do-over on our thirty-year-ago calf weaning practices because there is so much I could improve.

The cow herd on our farm consisted of 100 to 125 cows spread out across five or six pastures for summer grazing, with most of the pastures being five to 15 miles from our home base. One pasture was just two miles south, but it was a six mile drive if we loaded the cattle in trailers. Sometimes we drove them home on foot instead.

Weaning usually occurred in mid-November when we gathered cows and calves, over about a week's time, and hauled everything home. At home, the cows were dumped out on stalks and on the small pastures that served as our winter calving area. The calves were dumped in the muddy lot at the bottom of the hill, about 100 yards from the house.

From time to time we would repair and strengthen the fence surrounding the weaning pen – that muddy lot at the bottom of the hill – but it didn't keep them all in every year. I will always remember the evening I was finishing up chores at dusk, just as a hail storm rolled through.

I dashed for cover under the tin shed in the northwest corner of the pen just as the hail stones got bigger and more plentiful. The thundering boom of hail stones hitting the tin shed

suddenly made a deafening racket that startled the cattle, and they took off for the far side of the pen.

All I could do was watch as the whole pen of calves bolted to the south, hitting the solid south fence as a group, bending it but not breaking it. Then, like a sling-shot, the herd bounced off the south fence and headed back north. When they hit the north fence they flattened it and kept going, running hard as they disappeared out of my sight.

Great memory!

We fed hay with a tractor, but the weaning ration was fed in a bunk in the middle of the pen. The delivery system was a scoop shovel. We drove the old pickup through the mud, alongside the bunk, and started scooping.

Experienced cattlemen are already saying, “Greg, you should put those bunks perpendicular along the fence where the calves will congregate so they are more likely to find the feed.” Yeah, I get that now, but I didn’t know any better then.

If I had a do-over, I wouldn’t even wean calves in that lot. I would wean them in the pasture to the south instead. An old railroad track runs through the center of the farm, so the north half is separated from the south half by a double fence most of the way.

Near the weaning pen the pastures are separated by a single fence for about 400 feet. I could spend a couple of weeks building a stout fence along that stretch, or I could spend two hours stringing a hot wire to better separate the two pastures. Then we could unload cows in the north pasture and calves in the south pasture, or even sort them through the holding pen if we wanted. I know it would work.

But, why would that be a better way to wean calves?

It would be better because the calves would still have access to grass – the type of feed

they are used to consuming – and they wouldn't be in a muddy pen bawling their heads off. They would still have nose-to-nose contact with the mothers, providing a gentler weaning time and less stress on calves, cows, and the owners.

It would be even better if I could hold the cows and calves together in the south pasture for a week before weaning.

Research trials have shown that low-stress fence-line weaning causes less stress and results in weaned calves gaining more weight in the first two weeks after weaning, as compared to abruptly weaned calves. An added benefit is less bawling, making it possible for the owners to get some sleep at night.

Ear plugs are another option, if the noise is all you care about, but low-stress fence-line weaning is the way to go.

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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