

News Column

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FEEDING NEWLY WEANED CALVES

When my oldest brother was in 8th grade our mom fed him milkshakes every evening to try to fatten him up. He was 5' 9" and I'm guessing about 130 pounds – tall and thin.

Brother number two was the runt of the litter, a picky eater and a slow grower. He was closer to 5' 1" and 100 pounds in 8th grade – short and thin.

I was the easy keeper in the pen. I liked nearly all foods, and I liked them in quantities that assured I wouldn't be shaped like my brothers. Let's put me at about 5' 2" and 150 pounds in 8th grade – short and round.

If the McClure brothers were a pen of weaning calves, I was the kind you'd want to feed. You want calves that will find the feed early and often, gaining weight each and every day.

One of the biggest challenges when weaning calves is just getting them to eat. Newly weaned calves are used to eating milk and grass. That fancy high-energy diet we put in the bunk may be formulated perfectly to meet their nutrient needs but it can't do much for them if they won't eat it.

One suggestion for conditioning calves to eat from a bunk is to feed a small amount of the weaning ration to both cows and calves before weaning, while they are still on pasture. Calves will learn to eat the new feed from a bunk by eating side by side with their mothers.

Ideally, that pre-feeding period will occur in the same pen or pasture where calves will be weaned, and in the same bunks where they will be fed immediately after weaning. Leaving the

calves in the pasture while locking the cows in an adjoining corral for a few days generally works better than moving calves to a new pen and locking them in,...although it is the opposite of what our fathers and grandfathers used to do.

Because feed intake of newly weaned calves is often low – 1.0 to 1.5% of body weight – we try to feed a nutrient dense diet that will meet their needs at a low consumption level. Unfortunately, the feeds calves are used to and will readily consume (grass hay), aren't necessarily nutrient dense.

Since calves are used to eating grass, we can attract them to the nutrient dense ration we want them to eat by drawing them to the bunk with the very best grass hay we have. Nutritionists recommend starting calves on feed by putting 0.5% of body weight of a weaning ration in the bottom of the bunk, with 0.5% of body weight of high quality grass hay on top.

For a 500 pound calf, that's 2.5 pounds of the weaning ration and 2.5 pounds of grass hay on day one of weaning.

Gradually increase the amount of weaning ration by .25 to .5 pounds per day so the weaning ration portion is about 1.8% of body weight by day seven, while keeping the hay portion of the feed constant. Keep the hay on top of the weaning ration for the first three days after weaning, then switch to hay on bottom and weaning ration on top.

Still doing the math for 500 pound calves, you'll be up to 9 pounds of weaning ration and 2.5 pounds of hay by the end of the first week.

Once calves are fully on feed they will be consuming approximately 2.2 to 2.5% of their body weight in feed. Therefore, by 10-14 days post weaning, their total consumption (500 pound calves) will be 11 to 12.5 pounds of dry feed.

Remember, we always talk about rations on a dry weight basis. Silage is about 65%

moisture. If you transition a pen of weaned calves to eating silage it'll take about three pounds of wet feed to equal one pound on a dry basis.

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 gmclure@ksu.edu.

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