

News Column

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WEANING TIPS

Fifty years ago, on the McClure farm in Phillips county, we were fence-line weaning calves before fence-line weaning was even a thing. Sometimes it worked and sometimes we got up the next morning, repaired the fence, and sorted the calves off again to start all over.

It's a real stretch to say we were fence-line weaning because the ideal situation would be to leave the calves in a pasture they were accustomed to and sort the cows into an adjacent pen or pasture. Instead, we hauled them all home from pasture, locking the calves in a corral and dumping the cows in a pasture that shared a fence with the corral.

It didn't work very well.

Sometimes pen weaning is the way things have to be done and if that's what you're stuck with, there are some things that can be done to improve the process. The starting point is to set the pen up so calves will find feed and water.

The water in our corral was at the opposite end of the pen from where the calves congregated. The calves walked the south and west fences, looking to get back with their mothers. The water was on the east side, near an old barn and close to the working pen they didn't like to enter. We could have rigged a tank on the other end – the water line ran right through that pen – but we never did.

The next problem with our setup was the location of the feed bunks. We had a row of metal feed bunks lined up right smack in the middle of the pen. It was the high spot in the pen,

although not high enough to avoid becoming a muddy mess.

The mud wasn't the biggest problem though. The problem was with calves finding the feed bunk. Since calves are going to be walking the fence, bunks need to be placed perpendicular to the fence so calves will run into them,...and find feed.

In our lot, the bunks needed to be along the south fence. I suppose the old Studdebaker truck sitting along that fence was part of the reason we never put the bunks there, but to be honest, I didn't know we had a problem that was fixable. I thought calves were supposed to get wrung out before finally deciding to eat.

Once we have placed the bunks and water where calves can find them, the next step is to get the feed right. We want to get calves started on a nutrient dense weaning rations, but most calves aren't used to eating anything but grass. Therefore, half of the ration should be good quality grass hay on day one.

Newly weaned calves will only consume about 1% of their body weight in feed, so they should be given 0.5% of body weight (that's 2 ½ pounds for a 500 pound calf) of a weaning ration and an equal amount of grass hay. Place the grass hay on top of the weaning ration for the first three or four days on feed.

The weaning ration can gradually be increased, while keeping the hay on top for the first three or four days. By day four the hay can be put in the bottom of the bunk and the ration on top, increasing the amount of weaning ration while keeping the hay portion constant.

By day 10 the goal is to have calves eating 2% to 2.2% of their body weight and maybe up to 2.5% of body weight. The amount of feed will, of course, need to continue to gradually increase as calves grow in order provide an amount equal to 2% to 2.5% of body weight.

The key to getting calves to eat is to provide something they know they like, and make it

easy for them to find. Start with good quality grass hay on top because that's what calves know. Once they learn to eat, then the ration can be flipped (grain based ration now on top) and the amount of the nutrient dense weaning ration can be increased.

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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