

News Column

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FEEDING NEWLY WEANED CALVES

The farm where I grew up was pretty typical for the time. Dad farmed maybe 400 acres of crop land and had about 100 cows. There were sheep before the cows, and we raised a lot of pigs during my high school and college years, then for another six years after that. But the foundation of the operation was the cow herd.

Like most cattlemen in the north-central part of the state, we calved in the spring before cows went to grass and weaned in the fall when the cows came home. Weaning involved shutting the calves in the tightest pen we had, and hoping something didn't break out, or in, before the bawling stopped.

As you can imagine, weaning was stressful. The cows were stressed. The calves were stressed. And the humans were stressed.

The cows were mostly just unhappy that they were shut away from their babies — 7 to 8 month old calves, but still their babies. The babies were unhappy because they couldn't get to their mommas. But, they were also hurting because they weren't eating enough of this new feed we had thrown at them.

Sometimes the calves were even castrated, vaccinated, and dehorned the day they were weaned. Their stress was real.

As for the humans, our stress was self-induced. We thought we were doing things right — tight pen, lots of shots, and some really expensive pelleted feed — but we were actually getting

most of it wrong. Really wrong!

First off, like I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, castration, dehorning, branding and vaccinating should be done at least three weeks prior to weaning. Calves don't need that added stress at weaning time.

Then there's the feed.

There really was nothing wrong with the feed we provided, but there was definitely a problem with the delivery. We just threw it in a bunk in the middle of the pen and hoped they would find it, ...and eat it. Our calves had never seen fancy feed before, only grass. They didn't know to look in the bunk, then they didn't know what to do once they found this pelleted stuff in the bunk.

So, what should we have done? We should have provided some grass hay to get them started, and we should have moved the bunks.

K-State's Agricultural Research Center at Hays published an article a few years ago, detailing how they feed newly weaned calves. The basic concept is to place the feed where the calves can find it – bunks perpendicular to the fence, along the perimeter, so calves will run into them while walking the fence – and to feed something they recognize to get them started.

At Hays they start calves on about 0.5% of body weight of a nutrient dense weaning ration (a grain based mix), and about 0.5% of body weight of good grass hay. On days one through three, they put the weaning ration on the bottom and the hay on top. Then they start putting the weaning ration on top of the hay on day four.

Over a 7 to 10 day period, feed is gradually increased until they reach approximately 2.2-2.5% of the calves' body weight.

Here is the protocol they follow at Hays:

<u>Day</u>	<u>Weaning Diet</u>	<u>Hay</u>	<u>Feed Order</u>
1	0.5% body weight	0.5% body weight	Diet bottom/hay on top
2	0.7% body weight	0.5% body weight	Diet bottom/hay on top
3	0.9% body weight	0.5% body weight	Diet bottom/hay on top
4	1.1% body weight	0.5% body weight	Hay bottom/diet on top
5	1.3% body weight	0.5% body weight	Hay bottom/diet on top
6	1.5% body weight	0.5% body weight	Hay bottom/diet on top
7	1.8% body weight	0.5% body weight	Hay bottom/diet on top
8	– Increase diet by 0.25 to 0.50 lb. per calf/day		

Notice that the amount of the weaning diet is steadily increased while the amount of hay remains constant. Also note that the weaning diet is placed on top of the hay on day four instead of below. This causes the calves that haven't yet taken to the weaning diet to consume some of it will trying to get to the hay.

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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