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Weaning Wisely

Weaning is stressful for calves, cows and people, and very likely the most stressful time in a calf's life. *We* know the calf will have all it needs to survive and thrive, but the calf doesn't know that yet. Just as with humans, less stress leads to more thriftiness and reduced illness. Two methods have risen to the top of the list of best weaning strategies to reduce stress: fenceline weaning and 2-stage weaning.

Fenceline weaning separates cows and calves by a fenceline in a familiar pasture for several days before removing cows from the area. Fenceline weaned calves will still walk the fence for the first couple of days but not nearly as much as traditionally weaned calves. Consider fencing cows in a smaller area with supplemental feed and leaving the calves in the bulk of the pasture. In some cases, corrals have been used to hold cows. If cows and calves are already trained to an electric fence, a single hot wire with 3 strands of barbed wire may work fine. Calves should be familiar with the pasture and water source before weaning.

Two-stage weaning uses an anti-suckling device for three to seven days before actually separating the pair. Walking and vocalization are particularly reduced with 2-stage weaning, making it possibly the least stressful method. Some calves learn how flip the device up so they can still nurse. One study, using an adjustable nose clip, found these calves eating less and spent more time idle than fenceline or traditionally weaned calves. The study authors speculated that there may have been more discomfort with this particular device as this idleness was not reported in similar studies. Devices can be re-used but must be disinfected between uses. The 2-stage strategy calls for at least one additional handling to apply the device.

Ask yourself, "Is planning for fenceline weaning or applying and removing the devices at a specified time better than treating sick calves on an unknown schedule?"

There are other management practices that will help calves prepare for weaning. Immune systems can respond to disease challenge by having proper mineral nutrition and undergoing a vaccination program before weaning. Teach calves to eat by providing a creep feeder a month before weaning. Make sure pens and waterers are clean and in good repair. Evaluate pen size and bunk placement so that eating is more enticing than walking the fence.

Weaning as a general topic is an animal welfare issue, and a sign of the time we live in. This gives us cause for reflection. These methods won't fit all operations but what might not seem possible at first glance, may be accomplished with some strategizing.

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