



Early Weaning Equals Added Cow Weight

Trey Patterson, COO of Padlock Ranch, discusses the benefits of weaning calves ahead of schedule.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Sometimes weaning calves earlier than traditional weaning dates can be beneficial for both the cows and the calves — and for the rancher's financial picture. To do this efficiently, a person needs to plan ahead and be set up to do it properly.

Trey Patterson, nutritionist and chief operations officer (COO) of Padlock Ranch, Ranchester, Wyo., says his ranches have sometimes weaned calves as early as 4 months of age.

"We've used this management strategy, weaning calves earlier than usual, primarily in our first-calf heifers, but we've sometimes done it with cows as well. In both cases, it is a strategy to manage body condition," he explains.

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Early weaning gives the cow or heifer a chance to regain weight or to not lose weight in the fall — so the producer won't have to supply more feed in order to pick them back up again. This can be a consideration in a dry year when a ranch might be short on forage.

"I did some research when I was on faculty at South Dakota State University, working with a team of range scientists from SDSU and NDSU," he says.

In comparing spring-calving cows weaning in August with cows weaning in November, the studies found that the dry cow from August through November used 76% of the total amount of forage that a pair did.

"When we early-weaned, we were able to save 24% of the forage that would have been used during that period of time. Thus early weaning can be a beneficial tool when trying to manage body condition score on cows and/or forage use," he explains. "If it's a forage-availability question, you can calculate this to see if you are ahead to leave the calf on the cow (assuming body condition score is

adequate) and feed the cow more during that extra length of time she's lactating, or if it is cheaper to wean the calf and feed him, and not have to feed the cow as soon or as much."

Efficient converters

Young calves are very efficient feed converters.

"They eat a little more — on a dry matter basis — as a percent of body weight than a bigger calf and are pretty efficient at converting that to gain," Patterson says. "One of the things we do here at the Padlock Ranch, when we wean a younger, lighter calf, is to make sure the ration is built with that in mind. We provide a higher concentration of energy, protein and minerals, and a little less roughage."

The higher concentrate ration helps the younger calves start gaining quickly, and they are very efficient in utilizing this kind of feed. They can't eat very many pounds of forage because the rumen doesn't have that much capacity yet.

"So we increase the concentration of energy, protein

and minerals," Patterson says.

A producer would typically wean these calves onto some kind of concentrate ration rather than onto grass pasture as he could older calves.

"Later-weaned calves can go right on grass and do well, but early-weaned light calves need a higher level of nutrition to keep growing and gaining. They would survive without it, but will gain faster and might stay healthier on the higher level. I haven't found that earlier-weaned calves are less healthy; I think they are just as healthy as late-weaned calves, if they are managed appropriately," he says.

Patterson says he will wean calves even in the heat and dust of September, when many would think they are at risk. However, Padlock has yet to see any difference in the health of calves that are weaned early and those weaned at the normal time.

"We wean them in a feedlot facility with concrete pads and bunks and feed them a total mixed milled ration. They are separated from their mothers and we get them on feed as soon

as possible. In our situation they don't really get a chance to eat this type of ration and learn about it until they are weaned. The mixed ration contains hay and concentrate," Patterson explains.

The hay helps the calves adjust and keeps the rumen healthy. Another thing Padlock does for rumen safety is utilize fiber-based energy products, such as wheat midds and distiller grains, to keep starch levels from rising too high. Patterson says it's a good way to keep energy levels up without over-starching calves' diets.

The wheat-mid pellets are very palatable, and the calves start eating those fairly quickly in a mixed ration. They aren't off feed much at all even though they are stressed at being taken off their mothers. The more stressed they are and the lower their feed intake, the higher the nutrient concentration must be in what is being fed. If the calves aren't eating much, every bite needs to be nutritious. Patterson says it's important to focus on the pounds and grams of nutrients being ingested, rather than the percentage of the diet.

"Typically on these lighter calves, we don't use a wet ration. If we are using silage or haylage for weaned calves, we leave these young ones on a dry ration longer than we would a normal-age weaned calf. The older calves get worked onto corn silage fairly quickly," Patterson says. "After those early-weaned calves get a little more size and weight, over 400-450 pounds, we can start working more silage into their diet. From that point on they can be managed similarly to the older-weaned calves."

As cattle grow, Patterson says, the moisture has less impact on calves' dry matter intake. However, he adds, young calves don't have enough rumen space to consume enough nutrients to meet growth requirements. They simply cannot consume as much silage as larger calves.

Planning to pull

Patterson explains that producers not only need a reason to wean early but also need a plan to do it properly to ensure that diets are being managed correctly with a good management plan for the calves.

"A feed shortage, or cows thinner than you'd like them to be, or if you hope to market some bred cows and don't want them losing weight before sale, could all be reasons to look at early weaning. If you plan to sell some cows and your feed costs are reasonable, you might be money ahead to leave the weight on the cow to sell her, and efficiently put weight on the calf," Patterson says.

When producers reach a point where a calf doesn't seem to be

continuing to grow and the cow appears to be lowering her body score, Patterson recommends that this is the most economical time to wean the calf. Patterson says that producers aren't gaining anything by leaving the cow and calf together and are keeping the cows from picking back up before winter begins.

"There is also some good information on carcass quality on these early-weaned calves. They marble better," Patterson says. "But I think the main reason people do it is to manage the cow and/or their land more efficiently."

Early weaning is something very few people considered in earlier years, thinking the calves would be bigger (more pounds to sell in the fall if they are left on the cows longer), but often the cows would be thin by the next calving season.

If a person is set up to retain ownership of the

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calves or plans to keep them as replacements or to sell later as breeding stock, they might do very well with early-weaned calves.

"Marketing them can sometimes be a challenge unless a feedlot is set up to handle those," Patterson says. "If you are used to weaning and handling calves and have the facilities to do this, then it's an easy decision if you have issues with thin cows or running out of grass. But if you are not set up for it, and don't have experience with early weaning, it could be a wreck."

It's not for everyone but can work well for a person who is set up to do it and can commit to it.

"Your feed costs are an important factor," Patterson says. "If you have feed bought or put up at a reasonable price — your forages and/or some concentrates or by-products — there are some real opportunities here to help manage your cows and do a good job managing calves. If that's not the case, however, then it becomes more difficult to make it work." **HW**

Easy wean with nose flaps

A weaning method that can be used in conjunction with early weaning, to minimize stress on the cows and calves, is 2-step weaning with nose flaps. Mark and Della Ehlke raise registered Herefords and a few Angus near Townsend, Mont., and several years ago started installing the nose flaps when vaccinating their calves two weeks prior to weaning.

"I was somewhat skeptical but I am now a believer," Mark says.

These small plastic flaps can be easily installed with the calves restrained in a chute, and then the calves are returned to their mothers. The flap hangs down over the nose and mouth, preventing the calf from getting a teat into his mouth to nurse, but does not hinder eating grass/hay or drinking water.

"The calves still try—especially the first day—to nurse the cows, but I haven't seen any of them be able to nurse with the flap," he says.

The calf cannot nurse but is not emotionally upset because it's still with its mother and has her companionship during the weaning process. The cow starts to dry up, and the calf adjusts to not having milk. About five to seven days later, the cows and calves can be completely separated from one another (and the flaps removed) and are not stressed.

"The flaps go in easily; it's just one more small step while the calves are in the chute. And you have to take them out again, but we feel it is well worth it for the added benefits and health of the calf. The cows are also less stressed. When you do take the calves away the cows are not bawling," he says.

Ehlke said the biggest difference they noticed was how much easier their calves weaned with the help of the nose flaps, and the calves were more likely to go directly to eating regular feed. They were already adjusted to not having milk. If the calf still has mama for security while going through that transition, weaning is not stressful at all.

"We left the nose flaps in a little longer than the five days recommended by the manufacturer. We decided a few extra days wouldn't hurt, so we timed it with the first set of shots in the calf, to save extra handling. We gave the pre-weaning vaccination and put the nose flaps in at the same time. This saved one trip through the chute. Most of our calves' flaps are in for 10 days to 2 weeks. Only a few flaps came out ahead of that, and we put most of those back in," says Ehlke.



Della Ehlke, Townsend, Mont., says their calves weaned easier with the help of nose flaps.



They are reusable and last many years. When the pairs are finally separated, the calves are taken to corrals to be put on feed. "As we were unloading the calves at the preconditioning corrals, we took the flaps out of the calves as we let them out of the trailer," he says.

Thus there were no extra trips through the chute to deal with the nose flaps. While Ehlke says there is still some initial bawling in the cow herd when calves can't nurse, the flaps have significantly improved the adjustment on the actual weaning date.

This was another plus, not having to keep the cows corralled for several days. In the past, Ehlke explains, they would hold the cows in corrals until they were done trying to look for their calves.

"The calves did better than they'd ever done before, as far as going to feed, and the weight we put on them. This is probably the least stress on calves, even better than fence-line weaning, because they are right with their mothers. They get a little grumpy because they can't nurse, but they are not upset like they would be if the cow was gone," Ehlke says.

He first heard about the nose flaps after reading in a Canadian publication about some ranchers that had tried them. This method can revolutionize weaning for many ranchers, especially if they want low-stress weaning and are not set up for fence-line weaning. Being able to keep the calves with the cows and have them fully weaned when you take them away is a big plus. Weather is always a gamble at weaning time, but this weaning method doesn't add stress as if the calves are weaned abruptly.

"The calves do very well, with no setback. The gain we put on them pays for the extra time. And with this method of weaning, we don't have any slowdown in their gaining," says Ehlke. **HW**