



Low-Stress Weaning Methods

Take the extra work out of the weaning process this season.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Weaning time is often traumatic for calves, mama cows and ranchers, but in the past 25 years, many ranchers have found better ways to wean than putting calves in a corral and taking their mothers away.

Weaning creates physical and emotional insecurity along with stress for the calf — the latter is harder on it than suddenly being deprived of milk. A big calf doesn't need milk but still feels dependent on the cow and insecure without her. If confined in a weaning pen, calves pace the fence and bawl, often running frantically back and forth. If corrals are dry, this activity churns up dust that can irritate respiratory passages and open the way for respiratory infections. The calf is doubly susceptible to respiratory problems at this time because stress hinders the immune system.

Ron Gill, of Texas A&M, says weaning methods can make a big difference in calves' future health and performance.

"If producers use what we call two-stage weaning (with 'nose flaps'), which many smaller operators can readily do, this is the least stressful way to wean for both the calves and the cows," Gill says. "More people ought to be trying this. The next best is fence-line weaning. You can keep the cows and calves on pasture and just have a fence between them."



Weaning is often times a challenge for producers, but there are methods available to assure it runs smoothly.

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— Joseph Stookey

Gill encourages people not to process the calves or cows the day they separate them. He says pre-weaning vaccinations should be given beforehand, because keeping the calves as quiet and calm as possible when they are put across the fence is the goal.

If producers have to wean in a corral, Gill says the third best

way is to have the cows through the corral fence from the calves. He says some producers end up hauling the calves off somewhere to a better set of corrals and putting them on feed. Although it can be an effective method, Gill notes it comes with its own challenges.

"They are not used to the feed, the strange environment, and the sudden emotional stress and this puts them more at risk for respiratory issues," he explains. "The other three weaning systems have very few health problems, though the calves weaned in a drylot next to the cows have some potential for sickness."

Nose flaps

A dozen years ago an innovative anti-sucking device was created to make weaning easier. The plastic

"nose flaps" or "nose paddles" can be easily installed in seconds with 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 its mouth but does not hinder eating grass and hay or drinking water.

The calf can't suckle but is not emotionally upset because it's still with the cow. It has her companionship and protection during the weaning process. She begins to dry up her milk, and the calf adjusts to not having milk. About five days later the cows and calves can be completely separated from one another and the flaps can be removed.

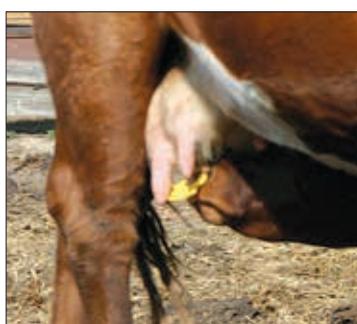
Studies at the University of Saskatchewan and Montana State University in 2005 showed this two-step weaning process resulted in much less stress than traditional weaning methods. Joseph Stookey, DVM, Western College of Veterinary Medicine and the University of Saskatchewan, was on the team that invented this device. He says when the study compared the two methods, there was a huge difference between the two groups in how they handled weaning. They found the two-step weaning works very well because of the way cattle are biologically programmed.

"Mammals are equipped to adjust to the milk being shut off, but they are not prepared for mom and milk to disappear at the same time," says Stookey.

Cattle are herd animals, and calves look to the more mature cattle for security. If a calf can stay with the cow and the social group through weaning, it is not stressed. In nature calves are weaned when the cow kicks them off before the next calf is born, and the weaning tags along with mom and the herd. Stookey says the nose flaps provide a more



Nose flaps can be a great tool in aiding producers during weaning time.



Nose flaps prevent calves from getting a teat into their mouths, but they don't hinder eating grass, hay or drinking water.



Calves historically transition better in a pasture weaning situation versus in a corral.

similar scenario in line with nature than other methods.

“There’s always the occasional smart calf who can figure out the nose flap and cheat to still get a teat in his mouth, but the vast majority don’t,” Stookey explains. “You only need to leave the flaps in the nose for three to five days though it doesn’t hurt to leave them in for a week. Then when you separate the pair it is unbelievable how at ease they are. They go about their business without worrying where mama is or baby is.”

Stookey says people used to say weaning stress was due to calves not knowing how to eat from a bunk, but it’s all about missing the cow. Taking the cow away creates tremendous emotional trauma for calves.

The research with nose flaps was dramatic, and Stookey says it all began with a student who asked the simple question of whether the calf misses the milk or the mother more in the weaning process.

“When we did the study and took away the milk, none of the calves were very upset,” he recalls. “Then when we took away the mother a few days later they didn’t miss her either, and we realized we’d already weaned the calves in the presence of the mother; that was the big difference. This was an amazing revelation about the weaning process.”

Stookey says the process can create some work for the producer, but there are several easier ways to go about it. Dylan Biggs, a producer who was on the project, uses low-stress handling, and he was able to wean 300 of his calves this way.

“He showed us a good way to sort cows from calves,” Stookey says. “He puts all the pairs together in a big pen, then lets them stream back out through an alley in which he’s taken off the bottom fence plank. The calves can pass right under the fence into the adjoining pen, trying to follow the mothers. They sort themselves, with no stress.”

Pasture weaning

On green pasture there’s no dust and calves do better than in a corral, since they are accustomed to eating grass and don’t go off feed as much as when changed to hay and concentrates. If grass is drying out, the pasture can be

supplemented with good-quality alfalfa hay.

Jim Gerrish, a grazing consultant based in May, Idaho, and a former specialist with the University of Missouri’s Forage Systems Research Center, pasture-weaned calves for more than 15 years while he was in Missouri. Calves at the research center were put in a pasture with woven wire fence they could not get through and kept there two or three days after being taken from their mothers.

“They did a bit of walking for a while, and more trampling than grazing, but when we put them out on better pasture after the second or third day they went right to grazing,” Gerrish says. “We weaned about 200 calves each year this way and had no sick calves.”

During this process the calves gained, on average, 1.6 lb. per day during the pasture-weaning period with no supplemental feeds.

Gerrish says if producers wean early to conserve scarce green feed in a dry year, when sending cows to market early or wanting to wean heifers’ calves early, pasture weaning is easier on the calves than corral weaning. In a drought, producers can save the best pasture for calves and put the cows on rougher feed or supplement them with hay.

Another way to reduce stress at weaning is to wean calves a few at a time, hauling their mothers away and leaving the weaned ones in their familiar pasture with the rest of the herd with mature cattle for security.

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Minimizing stress when corral weaning

Whatever can be done to reduce stress and risk for disease is helpful to today’s cattlemen.

Ron Gill, of Texas A&M, says when weaning in a corral, he recommends producers begin creep feeding at least 30 days before separating the cows and calves. He said this aids calves in learning how to eat because they will mimic their mothers. However, he says this is not the only trick he has up his sleeve to aid producers.

“Another thing you can do, with fence-line or corral weaning, is spend some time with those calves in the corrals or pastures,” he says. “This gets them accustomed to seeing people, and is also a distraction. Calves are curious about the person and are not just focusing on mom across the fence or worrying about where she is.”

By being with the calves, the producer becomes the surrogate for their mother. The calves will begin looking for the familiar face to comfort them, and weaning becomes a little less stressful. This process is more effective than putting out hay for them in the corral and coming back three or four days later when they quit bawling.

“It always pays to infuse yourself into the weaning process,” he says. “You become the caregiver and the calves focus on you. It doesn’t take much effort; you just have to allocate a little time every day, walking through them quietly after you get them in for weaning.”

During this stage, the calves are in panic mode and looking for guidance. Gill says when calves are given something to focus on, producers can stop all the walking and bawling and truly understand the acclimation process. Gill says these methods were taught by the late Bud Williams, showing ranchers and feedlot employees how to “settle” calves upon arrival at a new place or in the feed yard, and it has proven to work.

“It takes a little time, but it pays big dividends in less sickness,” he explains. “We don’t have research data on this, but we have a lot of observational and personal experience. I used to own a preconditioning facility, and when we started acclimating calves upon arrival our health problems and death losses dropped dramatically.”

In his experience when preconditioning just-weaned calves, it was beneficial to get them calmed down when they get off the truck and let them go through an acclimation process immediately. He says he and his helpers took the time to get the calves relaxed, where they would walk by calmly and they could stop them if they needed to.

Gill says the calves went right to feed as soon as their mind calmed down enough to think about things instead of just reacting to their environment. Consumption and average daily gain were a lot

higher in those calves, and he notes most of the calves that get sick are getting sick because they are not eating or drinking enough. Gill stresses the importance of interaction with people because it calms calves enough that they will then eat and drink.

“This allows the immune system to function better,” he explains. “Some people process calves the first day they come in. This adds additional stress, and if the calf has a compromised immune system some of those vaccines will actually depress immunity. This is why I like to wait a day or two, until we get them calmed down and they are not so flighty.”

Additionally, he says this short wait gives more chance for vaccines to become effective in the first round of shots. It is important producers remember not all the calves will calm down, but Gill says a high percentage will. He says it is important to aim for all the calves being extremely comfortable around people as soon as possible.

“Otherwise they are all running wildly. This is stressful and creates panic mode for the whole group,” he says. “After we’ve worked with them and they are accustomed to us, if a flighty one runs into the rest of those calves they look at him like, ‘what did you do that for?’”

Gill understands not everyone has the resources to spend time with these calves, but sometimes possibilities to do so aren’t utilized. He says nearly anyone who is calm around cattle can do this.

“It doesn’t have to be an experienced stockman. You just need someone who will spend a little time. It could be a spouse, young family members, just someone who enjoys being with cattle,” he explains. “If you send someone who doesn’t enjoy it, the calves won’t respond as well. They are good at reading people.” **HW**



When corral weaning, it can prove beneficial for producers to spend time with the calves getting them acclimated to people.



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Gerrish says if mothers of the weaned ones are taken far away where they cannot see or hear their mothers, the calves usually don't try to go through fences to find their mothers. Additionally, if the last place a calf suckled his mother before separation was in the field with the herd, he usually won't look any farther than that and soon resigns himself to her disappearance. The last group to be weaned no longer has mature cows for security, but they have the calm, already-weaned calves for company. Gerrish says another option is to leave a dry few baby-sitter cows with the weaned calves in the pasture until the calves' emotional crisis is past.

Fenceline weaning

Fenceline weaning, especially at pasture, helps minimize emotional stress because calves can be next to their mothers, even though they can't nurse. In Missouri, Gerrish had 40 cows of his own and utilized what he called cross-fence weaning by putting cows and calves in separate but adjacent pastures for two days. By doing this, calves still had the security of their mothers being right next to them through the fence. Gerrish says there was no frantic pacing and bawling like typical corral

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— Kit Pharo

weaning, and the calves had green pasture when they got hungry. By the third day, he reports the pairs were not so eager to get back together, and he moved the cows farther away.

The calves weaned on pasture never quit gaining. They also had less stress and fewer health problems. Gerrish says with this weaning method, producers can vaccinate calves the same day as weaning, since there is less risk of sickness and less failure to build good immune response due to stress.

On the other hand, he explains that calves in feedlot or corral weaning programs sometimes experience a standstill in weight for a few days even while being fed high-quality feeds. Also, he recommends the calves be vaccinated a couple of weeks ahead of weaning to have good immunity by the time they are

stressed, so this method means working the cattle twice.

Fenceline weaning works well if fencing is secure enough to keep animals from going through it. Gerrish says a pole fence, netting that's tall enough the cows can't reach over it, portable panels or several strands of hot wire will generally work.

Kit Pharo, Cheyenne Wells, Colo., has been using fenceline weaning for more than 20 years.

“We like to move pairs into the pasture a few days ahead, so the calves will be staying in familiar surroundings,” he explains. “They locate the water sources and perimeter fences while still with their mothers.”

He advises that the primary water source be near the fence, close to the adjacent pasture where their mothers will be after separation, and that pastures not have corners in the dividing

fence where animals could bunch up.

“On weaning day we allow pairs to finish their morning grazing. Then we slowly bring them to our sorting corral and leave them awhile to let them mother up and nurse one last time,” he explains. “When we come back, there isn't any bawling. We quietly sort the cows out one gate into their pasture and calves out the other gate into theirs.”

Most cows will be ready to file out when the gate is open, knowing they are going to a fresh pasture. He says if producers are patient the herd will essentially sort itself. They typically leave two or three dry cows with the calves to provide reassurance and leadership. Since the calves are returning to the same pasture they came from, they usually aren't bothered, and he says it may take a couple of hours before cows and calves go searching for one another.

“As soon as they meet at the fence, their anxiety disappears,” he explains. “Often you’ll see a cow and her calf lying on opposite sides of the fence, chewing their cud.”

Typically, they will graze and come back periodically to check on one another. Pharo says after three days, fewer cows come back to the fence. They know where their calves are but are less concerned about them. Likewise, the calves begin to realize they don't need their mothers anymore. Pharo waits at least four days before the cows are moved away. He says by this time they are usually so eager to go to fresh pasture all he has to do is open the gates ahead of them. He says he has seen very few want to turn back for their calves but recommends leaving the cows for another couple of days if they are not ready to leave.

In a study of fenceline weaning in California, the calves gained 31% more weight after 10 weeks than the average calf weaned away from its mother. In a Nebraska feedlot, a study showed that fenceline-weaned calves had 29% better daily gains and 35% lower cost of gain than groups of calves weaned the traditional way. **HW**



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