



Late Weaning

Wintering calves with their mothers cuts back on feed costs and diseases.

by **Heather Smith Thomas**

Calving later in the year, April through June, has its benefits with ample green grass and less need for harvested forage when a cow's nutritional requirements peak during lactation.

Along with later calving comes later weaning. Some cattlemen choose to winter calves with the cows and wean at about 10 months of age in late February through early April rather than during early winter's harsh weather to reduce feed costs, lessen stress and decrease risk for disease.

Reducing input

Jay and Krista Reiser, Washburn, N.D., save on winter feed costs by wintering calves with cows and

holding off weaning until spring. "The calves are born in May and June, and we wean them in late March, with fence-line weaning," Krista says.

For the last eight years, Nick Faulkner, Garrison, N.D., has chosen to winter calves with their mothers. "We wean them two months before the cows calve again," Faulkner says. "We calve in late April. This has worked very well for us. We don't have to give any vaccinations for scours or other calf diseases," he says. Being on mother's milk through winter, without the stress of weaning, seems to keep calves healthy.

"In the spring, calving during warm weather, we are not seeing

any problems," Faulkner says.

"There have been a few cows that can't handle it as well, losing body condition nursing their calf through winter, but those are the ones we cull because they don't fit the program."

Faulkner says body condition score is monitored throughout the winter and the ranch's feeding program helps keep most of its cows in good shape.

"On our ranch we plant a lot of cover crops, hay them, and feed that to cows through winter," he says.

"They have top quality feed to help them keep body condition. Even if some cows lose a little weight, most of those thinner cows bounce back before they calve. Some of the cows you'd think might not do so well

can really recover nicely with high quality feed.”

Wintering pairs together simplifies the Faulkners’ winter-feeding program. “My father-in-law raised corn for silage for winter feed for 30 years, and a few years ago we dropped that completely,” Faulkner says. “We are no longer raising corn. We do more haying, but the calves go through winter so much better on the cows than they do being weaned.”

The Faulkners keep their calves after weaning on grass and sell them in the fall. The ranch has been gradually increasing cow numbers and retaining replacement heifers. Faulkner says their calves that are weaned in late February really bloom when they hit the grass.

“The calves are not stressed at all by weaning — about half of them are already weaned by their mothers by the time we wean the group,” Faulkner says, as this is a natural age for them to wean.

“We do fenceline weaning so it’s low stress,” he says. “Within three days after we separate the pairs, there are only one or two still bellowing at each other. The calves are so content that they don’t care where they are.” At that age they are no longer so dependent on their mothers.

“The calves learn from their mothers, regarding eating habits, etc. The longer you can keep them with their mothers, the better the calves will do,” he says.

The Reisers have always run their heifers with the cow herd, because they want those calves to learn coping skills from their mothers — how to winter graze, how to graze through snow and where to go to get out of the wind.

“They get some smarts from the cows,” Jay says. “In earlier years we used the nose-flap weaning, keeping the replacement heifers with their mothers. In previous years we sold the steers and the heifers we didn’t plan to keep, straight off the cows. We put nose flaps in the replacement heifer calves so they never had to leave their mothers’ side.”

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Cow diets

Jay and Krista Reiser, Washburn, N.D., didn’t feed anything special to their lactating cows in winter. “Since we are calving in May/June, the cows were getting CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) bales and very plain hay,” Krista says. “We were a little worried about their ability to hold body condition while lactating, but they did ok.”

Calving that late in the season, the cows were still in early gestation during most of the winter and were able to pick up any lost weight by calving time. “It worked very well, considering the low quality forage, and the calves gained a pound per day,” she says. “We were very satisfied with the results.”

Jay says some people may question the idea of leaving calves on the cows through winter. “Research at one of the universities some years back found early weaning a calf and then feeding the cow and calf separately saves 15% on feed,” he says.

This may depend on what is being fed, how it is being fed and when. If pasture is short during drought, it may pay to wean calves early, to put them on the best available feed and to let cows continue to graze poor-quality forage without the added stress of lactation.

“Keeping a calf on a cow may not be a good option if you have a heavy milking herd, since this would put more nutritional stress on the cow,” Jay says. “This comes back to a management decision to have that kind of cow.”

Heavy-milking cows are not as efficient as more moderate-milking cows. But if cows are average in milk production and winter feed is adequate (grass or hay), it may be more cost effective to leave calves on the cows — if the cows are not calving again until May or June. **HW**



PHOTO BY LAUREN MARTIN

At that point the Reisers were only keeping about 30 heifers. Three years ago, however, they kept all of their calves through winter and decided to leave them on their mothers and do fenceline weaning.

“We wanted to keep the calves on the cows longer, partly to allow the rumen to develop more fully before weaning,” Jay says. “We

heard Gerald Fry speak at the Northern Plains Sustainable Ag Winter Workshop at Aberdeen South Dakota in February of 2012. He mentioned research showing that it takes nearly ten months for the rumen to fully develop — to optimum potential for digesting forage. He thinks the beef industry is shortchanging

itself with early weaning and putting calves on grain.”

Fry talked about optimizing genetics and management to produce the best grass-finished animal. “In a slide presentation he showed pictures of a rumen from an early weaned calf and from a calf weaned at 10 months, illustrating the difference between the two ruminants in color and structure.

“The micro-villi, microscopic protrusions on the cells of the rumen lining which increase the total surface size of the cell, were a lot more developed in the later rumen. With a stronger set of micro-villi the animal is able to absorb more nutrients, more efficiently — whether from grain or forage.

“After learning about this, we realized that weaning our calves early was not a good option if we wanted to raise them on grass or keep them as cows. They will be more efficient for harvesting grass and more able to convert it into meat by waiting longer to wean,” Krista says.

Jay adds that the other reason for leaving the calves on the cows is that it was easier, saving time and labor. “We’ve always wanted to run just one herd though winter. Leaving calves on the cows was something we wanted to try, in our new program of keeping the calves over as grass calves. It made sense to do it this way.”

Krista says it was easier to have one herd for feeding and to let the cows worry about the calves. “We didn’t have to treat any for sickness,” she says. “There was no stress on the calves and no stress on us. When we did the fence-line weaning in March the calves were ready to wean and the cows were ready to wean them.”

Faulkner is cutting winter feed costs. “We are still running tractors but we’re doing a lot of bale grazing with the cattle, trying to reduce costs,” he says. “It all ties together with the later weaning. The calves are eating with the cows — whether bale grazing or pasture grazing — rather than waiting for the truck to bring feed out to them.” He says the calves are more motivated to find

Following nature

The calf develops a more efficient rumen if he can nurse until he is about 10 months old, according to Gerald Fry, a stockman in Arkansas who has studied cattle nutrition and genetics for many years.

“The cow’s butterfat — not the milk — is what enables the villi in the rumen to fully develop,” Fry says. “If the calf doesn’t get the butterfat for that full 10 months, he is inferior in his digestive ability to what his genetics would otherwise dictate. It is important for the cow to feed that calf for the first winter of its life. You cannot feed a supplement that can equal what the cow will give the calf; the dam’s milk is specifically designed for that calf. Young animals need proper nutrition at the right stage of their lives.”

Mother Nature programmed cattle, like bison, to spend the first winter with their mothers. “You cannot winter a calf and do as much for him as what his mother can do,” he explains. “Even at the expense of the cow’s body condition, you are still better off to let her feed that calf. If she isn’t calving again until May or June, it doesn’t matter if she loses 200 to 300 lb. from her summer weight. If she has 45 days of green grass before she calves again, she will put on enough body condition to have a healthy calf and re-breed within about 85 days after calving.”

There is not much nutrition in dead grass, especially tame pasture grasses, once the grass matures, dry outs or freezes. “Whether it’s stockpiled grass or hay, it still contains all its micronutrients but has very little actual energy,” Fry says. “It doesn’t take much energy, however, for a cow to produce butterfat; all she needs is adequate digestible fiber.” Her rumen creates energy during the breakdown of fiber.

“In the lactating cow during dead of winter, most of what comes out of her udder is butterfat,” he explains. She is giving less volume than she would on green grass, but the quality is very high.

“Another thing the average cattleman never thinks about is the protein in the milk,” Fry says. “In the beef cow the ratio is about 1 to 1. In other words, if 4% of her milk is butterfat, she needs to have about 4% of it to be protein. When her milk has that balance, it has all the makings for a calf to develop properly — the perfect diet for that calf.”

Fry explains that today bison are the most closely related wild animal to cattle. “They have their babies in April, and breed back quickly,” he says. “Two cycles is all nature gives them. If they don’t get pregnant, they skip a calf. Their estrus cycles, along with the bulls’ testosterone production and peak fertility, is tied to season of year.”

By contrast domestic cattle have been selectively bred for certain desired traits; they have been gradually changed for several thousand years, and will breed and calve year-round.

“Cattle are ruminants with a 9-month gestation, like the bison. If we imitate nature and calve during April and May like the bison, and let the calf stay at mother’s side through winter, all she needs is 45 days to dry off and prepare for the next calf with adequate colostrum, and then breed back,” Fry says. **HW**



PHOTO BY JAKE SELLMAN

their own feed and don't become spoiled and lazy.

"We want our cattle to be working for us, rather than us working for them," Faulkner explains. "The biggest thing I've noticed about the later weaning is how much easier it is, with fewer problems and less sickness. There is a lot of expense, feeding silage or grain through winter. The corn was expensive to grow. We can use that same land to raise grass, maybe a higher quality grass, at less expense than the corn or grain."

Less labor

Krista says labor costs should always be considered. From a labor and time standpoint and the cost of fuel when taking feed to cattle in two groups, keeping calves on the cows may save money. There has been a lot of discussion over the years about whether it is better to wean calves and feed them separately or to keep them with the cow, and the best answer may depend on each rancher's situation.

She says the important thing is to weigh income and expense. If money can be saved on winter feeding costs and labor, it doesn't matter if the calves are not gaining to full potential during winter. They make up for it on grass the next spring. In today's world, a person may be better off with a little less gain at that point in a calf's life and a lot less expense.

Ken Miller has been bale grazing cow-calf pairs through winter for the past six years in south-central North Dakota. "Two of those years we had about 100 inches of snow, and it still worked fine," he says. "I usually put a week's worth of feed out there, and then move them to the next bunch of bales. I feed some high-quality hay along with some coarse hay," he says.

The cattle eat some of the poorer quality hay to add fiber to their diets to balance the good hay and trample and bed on the rest. This technique/method/practice puts more organic matter and carbon on the ground and improves the pasture.

"We are more than doubling the production," Miller says. "Plus, we cut our winter feeding costs. The past six winters I have burned less than 100 gallons of diesel fuel in my tractor to feed 100 pairs. Some people think that when it is very cold the calves won't perform very well, wintered with their mothers on hay, but they do quite well. We wean them in late March. Since we don't calve until late May and early June the cows have adequate time to recover."

When the calves are weaned, Miller feeds them separately from the cows for about a month, still bale grazing. He trails the cows home, leaving several older cows with the calves. He then puts the calves back with the cows again so everything can be run as one herd. He's found that by wintering calves with their mothers, there is less sickness.

"We don't give them any vaccines anymore," Miller says. "We used to give pre-weaning shots, but we've eliminated all that. We do use a mineral program in the winter for a couple months, but that's about the only supplementing."

The cattle graze as long as possible and then, when the grass gets covered with snow, they start bale grazing. "They are still on grass through December and into the first part of January. So we cut our actual feeding time. We used to feed around five months out of the

year, and now we are down to about four months of feeding, even in bad winters. One year we fed for only 90 days of full feeding," he explains.

"Calving in May/June limits a person to selling light calves if you are marketing them in November," Miller says. "But if you leave them on the cows and run them on grass the next year and sell them in August or September they are a good weight and you don't have much feed investment in that animal."

Miller used to calve in February and March, wean in late October and then background to sell in January and February at about 800 lb. "We had a lot of feed and fuel invested in them," he says. "Usually August is a good month to sell because there are not very many calves being marketed then."

Environment matters

Wintering pairs together seems to be a new concept to many people, but it has been done for a long time in Australia and Africa. A person sometimes has to adapt ideas to fit his own conditions.

Cody Sand is on a family ranch in south central North Dakota, running about 300 cows. The Sands had been wintering their cows on neighboring farmers' cornstalks, but three years ago, they left most of the heifer calves on the cows through the winter.

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Tips for managing calves during winter

Gearld Fry, a stockman in Arkansas, uses electric fence to creep feed calves in winter while they are on their mothers. "I take a bale of the best hay I have and set it in an area where I can let the calves get to it and the cows can't," Fry says. "This makes a major difference in development of the calf. He's old enough to be ruminating well by that time." Calves don't need grain, but they do need good quality forage.

"I use electric fence around a bale, but there are other ways to creep feed a calf without using grain," he explains. "A stockman in New Hampshire has a 20-acre field of triticale and he lets his calves graze this in winter. Even though it gets bitterly cold in New Hampshire, he does very well leaving the calves on the cows. He gets a lot of growth on the triticale before freezing weather, and uses electric fence to keep the cows out. The calves go under that fence to graze the triticale all winter. It is incredible how good those calves look. They have their mothers, and good grazing — the best of both worlds."

Fry says cattlemen are in the business of selling grass, and when they let calves creep feed like that, they are selling grass through their growth. "A nursing calf that weighs 300-400 lb. doesn't eat a lot, maybe 2 lb. of hay per day or 8 to 10 lb. of green forage, but it is incredible what it does for him." **HW**

“Prior to that we were backgrounding our calves,” Sand says. “We weaned them on grass for a couple of years and that worked nicely but it necessitated a higher input than we wanted. So we left them on the cows all winter long. The first time we tried this with just with our replacement heifers — and it went very well.”

The ranch is in the hills in good grass country, but there’s not much farm ground in this area. About 15 miles east the landscape changes to lower, flatter farming country. “We have a really good relationship with a farm family who used to have cows. They love having our cows around in the winter, and love seeing them go home in the spring so they don’t have to deal with cows the rest of the year,” he says.

“We haul the cows 40 miles from our place to winter graze on cornstalks and it really works nicely. Three years ago we left the heifer calves with their mothers

and they did very well. The cows lost body condition a little quicker, still nursing the calves, so we monitored them a little more closely and moved them more often to new cornfields. But the calves did excellent — much better than I thought they would. I was very happy with the way it went.”

Sand says the calves looked better in the spring after being on their mothers than they did after going through winter on their own. “We didn’t get as much gain as in a feedlot situation, but we prefer them to develop as a heifer, to become cows,” he says. They need to maximize their ability to utilize forage, not grain.

Wintering the calves with their mothers can be a very efficient, low-cost method, depending on calving dates. “Calving later, we went to not putting up hay anymore, and so far I haven’t had to buy any because we had carryover hay,” Sand says. “Some winters are really nice and we hardly

feed any hay, but when conditions are worse some supplemental feeding may be necessary.”

He keeps steers on the cows through fall, selling them in November or December, depending on the weather. “If the weather is nice, especially on the corn stalks, they do really well at first, cleaning up any corn that might be on the ground in addition to the stalks,” he says.

The cows breed back on time because they have enough chance to recover from lactation before calving again, and the replacement heifers do well, grazing all winter with their mothers. “They were never penned up and they know how to forage,” Sand says.

“This makes better cows; they are more ambitious to travel around finding something to eat rather than waiting for a feed truck. They are working for us, rather than us working for them. We did that for way too long.” **HW**



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