

Wean Early and Save 25% of Pasture Forage

by **Kris Ringwall**

The current dryness affecting the land has caused all livestock producers to review options. For some in a drought situation, the only real solution is rain. But producers need to take charge, whether the season is dry or wet.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center has and will continue to manage during dry times. The center is in a semiarid climate and dryness is not a stranger.

Managing grazing time and stocking rate are critical. As a result, the center has measured available biomass on the range when cows have their calves removed in mid-August versus early November.

The thought is that removing calves would lessen the impact on the production unit during times when rain is scarce. First, no drought plan works if there is no grazing plan with which to start.

The retained ownership question

To begin, a properly designed grazing system that does not put undue pressure on grass is a priority. While those wetter-than-average years tempt producers to increase stocking numbers, years like this one remind us overstocking is never a good idea. Stick to the properly planned grazing system and appropriate adjustments.

This discussion is not about what grazing system is best, though. The main point is to have a grazing system.

The next step is to plan orderly herd reductions that fit the operation. Today, I want to focus on early weaning as an option to manage dry pastures later this summer.

Center research has shown weaning calves in August lowers the nutritional requirements of the cow herd because dry cows eat less than lactating cows. Center animal scientist Doug Landblom notes "...

weaning calves early has a positive impact on growth and efficiency during the backgrounding phase, improves cow body condition score, reduces range forage utilization, and shortens the lifetime feeding period of steers held for retained ownership."

Data collected by Landblom showed the significant benefits of early weaning. At the center, the body weight of cows whose calves were weaned in mid-August was 1,296 lb. in August, and the cows still weighed 1,311 lb. in November. Cows with calves not weaned early weighed 1,333 lb. in August but lost significant weight nursing calves on dry pasture and weighed 1,197 lb. in November.

In other words, the cows with calves that were weaned early gained 15 lb. and utilized 28% less forage biomass than the cows whose calves were not weaned early. The cows with calves that were not weaned early lost 136 lb. of body weight.

Wow! Cows with August-weaned calves gained weight and saved a significant amount of valuable feed. Cows with traditionally weaned calves lost weight while consuming more feed.

The data also reflected a significant decrease in body condition score for the cows: 6.1 for the cows with calves that were weaned early and 4.7 for the cows with calves that were not weaned until November. This is a difference of almost a 1.5 body score less for the cows with calves that were weaned traditionally.

The focus today is the cow. In a dry year, the logic would be to do some culling, getting poorer cows off the pastures. But before culling too deeply, consider pulling the calves off the cows and simply leaving the cows on pasture.

If the year continues to be dry, the cows may not perform as well as the cows in Landblom's study at

the center, but we have no reason to believe they would not be better off than the cows with calves at their side. The logic is that calves can be hauled to the feed easier than the cows, so keep the good cows on pasture and move the calves to a more plentiful and reasonable feed source.

One point of caution: Although the early weaned calves perform very well postweaning, lightweight calves still do not bring enough dollars to offset the production costs associated with the cow.

The center calves weighed just shy of 400 lb. in August. A 400 lb. calf has tremendous potential to grow once feed is located and appropriate arrangements are made. The question of selling the calf or retaining ownership needs to be asked.

A grazing plan

Retaining ownership is an established concept but, for many, a new concept. In fact, many producers are very uneasy with the additional risk of owning calves once the calves have left the control of the home operation. But still, fast-gaining calves with good genetics designed for premiums on the rail make exploring the concept worthwhile.

More on that later. Let's return to where we started. By weaning calves early, a producer can save more than 25% of available forage in a dry year. That strategy is a great tool to have in the management plan and may very well need to be implemented this year.

As with any drought management tool, do not wait until forage availability is critical for the herd. Implement drought plans sooner than later. **HW**

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