Extension Bulletin E-2929, New, February 2005

Fence-line weaning:
A Marketing Tool for Your Calves

Norman Suverly, District Livestock Extension Educator, MSU Extension
Ben Bartlett, D.V.M., District Livestock Extension Educator, MSU Extension

Introduction

Is weaning something you dread so much that you just want to put the calves on a truck and let the buyer worry about it? Do you avoid weaning your calves because you think you don't have adequate facilities? Does weaning seem like just too much work? Would you be interested in a reduced-stress method for weaning calves? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you should consider fence-line weaning. It is a low-stress, minimum-facility, low-labor procedure that is being used by many producers across the country.

The traditional method of weaning is complete separation of the calf from its dam with no interaction. You could call this an "out of sight, out of mind" approach to weaning. This puts tremendous stress on the calves, however, causing them to bawl for several days, walk the fence, not eat and not gain weight. This publication describes fence-line weaning, summarizes recent research showing its benefits, and acts as a worksheet for producers who would like to implement a fence-line weaning system.

Description

The name, fence-line weaning, pretty much describes itself. Calves and their dams are simply weaned from one another across a fence line so they remain in sight of one another and in earshot (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Although separated, cows and their calves can keep fence-line contact when producers use this low-stress weaning option.

Fence-line weaning separates cows and calves using either a permanent or temporary fence. With proper pasture management, calves have access to good quality grass, ideally up to 60 days. Minimizing housing and dietary changes reduces stress. Keeping the cattle on pasture promotes uninterrupted feed intake and weight gain while meeting the nutritional needs of both growing calves and non-lactating cows. In the ideal situation, the only nutritional change for the calf is the loss of a small amount of milk.

Benefits

Recent research from the University of California, Davis, found that weight gain during the first 2 weeks after weaning improved by 95 percent in calves that were fence-line

weaned compared with calves that were completely separated from their dams. After 10 weeks, fence-line-weaned calves had gained 31 percent more weight than traditionally weaned calves (Figure 2). The study also found that calves that were fence-line weaned did not go off feed at weaning,

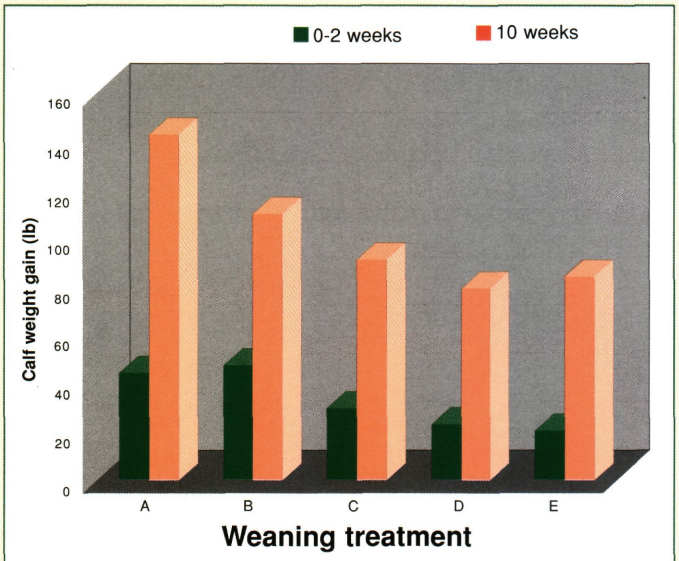

Fig. 2. Performance of calves on different weaning treatments.

bawled less, spent less time pacing the fence and spent more time lying down.
If you can sell heavier weaned calves that are bunk broke, your calves will have an edge in the marketplace over calves that are bawling, stressed and just waiting to get sick.

Keys to Fence-line Weaning

Use at least three strands of electric wire or one hot wire standoff from a standard fence such as woven wire (Figure 3). You should have a minimum of 2,500 volts of charge to make sure the calves don't get through. It is a good idea to train the calves to a hot wire before weaning. Run one strand along an existing stretch of fence and let them get used to it. Let them find out what that voltage will do.

Fig. 3. This farm uses four strands of electrified high tensile wire to fence-line wean.

The second key is good grass. High quality pasture can be promoted with intensive rotational grazing management. Start planning before the grazing season begins (Table 1). For more information on intensive grazing, refer to MSU Extension bulletin E-2288, Controlled Grazing: Balancing Forages, Livestock & Management. This bulletin can be acquired at your local county extension office or on the web at www.emdc.msue.msu.edu.

Table 1. Planning your weaning pasture.

Pasture size can be estimated as follows:

500-lb calf eating 3% of its body weight = 15 lb of dry matter/day.

Dense pasture can provide 1,500 lb of dry matter/acre.

One acre (1,500 lb) / 15 lb/calf = 100 calves/acre/day.

If you had 50 calves and wanted grass for 30 days, you would need (50 X 30) = 1,500 calf-days. 1,500 divided by 100 calf-days per acre equals 15 acres.

Fence-line weaning: A Marketing Tool for Your Calves

Here is a timetable to help you plan for your fence-line weaning (Table 2).

Table 2. Fence-line weaning timetable and checklist for October 1 weaning.

May 1

- Identify a pasture close to working facilities with adjacent space for the cows to be put on limited feed.
- Plan for water supply.
- Plan how to deliver grain to bunks in pasture.
- Decide where and how cows and calves will be moved when the weaning pasture is grazed off.
- At beginning of grazing season, plan rotations so that the calf weaning pasture will be grazed until early August.

August 1-15

- Fertilize calves' weaning pasture and rest it until weaning time.
- Assure adequate calf pasture to provide a minimum of 7 days of grass (14 days are better, and 45-60 days of high quality grass are best).
- Assess grass quality. High quality pasture is dense, green, growing grass 6 to10 inches tall.

September 30

- Check weaning fence for adequate voltage.
- Inspect fences. Use three electrified wires or one stand-off electric wire on non-electric fence with minimum voltage of 2500V.
- Double check the water supply to make sure calves will recognize it.

October 1

- Separate calves from dams.
- Consider leaving one or two dry cows with calves to assist in moving calves.
- Move calves to familiar high quality pasture.
- Dams are left across fence from calves in a dry lot or lower quality pasture.
- Consider deworming calves and treating for lice and grubs.

October 1-15

- If grass is limited, start calves on grain. Feed 1 to 3 lb/hd/day divided into two feedings. Increase slowly over 10 to 14 days.
- Place feed bunks close to dam's fence.
- Do not offer hay until calves have been started on grain for 5 to 7 days.
- Cows can be moved away from calves after 4 to 5 days.

November 10

- Deliver calves (be surprised at heavy weights).
- Pick up bigger check.

Tips for Success and Profit

- Calves should see and be close to their dams.
- Have enough high quality grass for a minimum of 1 week.
- If grass is marginal, start calves on grain as soon as possible.
- Use familiar palatable grain mix.
- Train cows and calves to an electric fence before separation.
- Check your fence line every day to identify any problems. Use a voltage meter to check power.

Conclusion

Fence-line weaning can provide many benefits for your operation. It increases your marketing options as a cow/calf producer because you can sell a calm calf that is bunk broke and has the potential to perform well in a backgrounding or feedlot operation. If you consider that cattle feeders want to buy calves weaned and vaccinated and you, a cow/calf producer, want to sell as many pounds as possible, fence-line weaning makes sense. You can add pounds to your calf crop without additional cows and with minimal investment in time, equipment and money. Less stress on the calves and more pounds to sell might just reduce your stress level as well.

References

Pirelli, G., and W. A. Zollinger. 2002. Weaning management for calves. CL 748, Cow-Calf Management Guide and Cattle Producer's Library. Ag Communications, University of Idaho.

Price, E. O., J. E. Harris, R. E. Borgwardt, M. L. Sween, and J. M. Connor. 2003. Fence line contact of beef calves with their dams at weaning reduces the negative effects of separation on behavior and growth rate. J. Ani. Sci. 81:116-121.

New 2:05-1M-BRD/KMF-$1.50, for sale only.