

Hunter Nickell

Weaning Calves

Fall is known to many as the “season of change;” temperatures drop, leaves turn to rust, and farmers harvest their crops. While this fall might look different due to the extreme summer heat and little precipitation, weaning seasons will remain the same. While the first official day of fall isn’t until September 22nd, most producers with a spring calving herd will begin weaning in September through the end of the year, depending on the age of their calves.

Beef calves are typically weaned from age five to seven months when they weigh 500-700 pounds. While some calves can successfully wean at 45-60 days, those calves require very high quality, dust-free, and uniform rations that are easily digestible (UNL Beef). While there are many different strategies for weaning calves, each method will be dependent on the producer and the year (i.e. weather). For example, most of the Southwind District is experiencing the effects of drought and may choose to early wean the calves. When early weaning calves, this drastically changes the nutritional needs of the cow and thus reduces stress on the pasture, hay, or feed supply.

When determining which weaning strategy is best for you and your operation factors like feed availability and space for calves are things to take into account. Weaning is a stressful time for calves and to reduce that stress, things like fenceline weaning or using nose flaps that don’t allow the calf to drink milk from the udder are helpful. When producers decide it is time to wean calves they usually bring them in to vaccinate, castrate, brand, dehorn, etc. Vaccinating post-weaning isn’t recommended because due to stress, the calf has increased levels of cortisol for 1-7 days which in turn

reduces the immune response and vaccine efficacy (Michigan State University Extension). The best time to process calves is 10-14 days pre-weaning or at least eight days post-weaning. Using one of the above strategies provides the best possible vaccine efficacy and promotes the health of the newly weaned calf.

Once the calves are in the weaning pen, providing them with a nutritional supplement such as forage or a concentrate supplement to fill the void from the milk is a must. Providing a 13-14% Crude Protein supplement plus roughage gives calves the proper nutrition they need to gain weight they might have lost in the transition period, and prepare them for their next stage of life. Calves should be in the weaning pen for at least 30 days before being sold through the sale barn, for best results. Having bunk broke, fully vetted, and weaned calves running through the sale ring is always fantastic in my book!

If you have any questions or would like to test your forages or balance a ration, please contact Hunter Nickell, Livestock Production Extension Agent, at nickell99@ksu.edu or 620-365-2242.