

**From:** Peel, Derrell  
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**Cow-Calf Corner Readers: We have had technical difficulties with our listserv. You may have received the newsletter one or more times yesterday. If so we apologize for the repeated emails. We believe most subscribers did not receive yesterday's newsletter so we are resending it and we apologize for the tardy delivery.**

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

## **The Newsletter**

**From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

**April 11, 2011**

**In this Issue:**

### **Focus on What You Can Control**

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

### **Early Weaning for the Beef Herd**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

## **Focus on What You Can Control**

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

For many years I have heard cattle producers say that production is easy and marketing is hard. At today's record price levels, I would argue that the opposite is true and will be for some time to come. Most anything one has to sell brings a good value in the market these days. Producers need to focus on having something to sell and managing production to take advantage of the market opportunities today.

It has always been true that producers had more opportunity to influence profitability by managing production and cost than by marketing. Nevertheless, there have often been market signals that encouraged cattle producers to emphasize certain production practices over others at various times. Historically, cattle cycles encouraged maximum cow-calf production on some occasions and emphasized retained ownership or stocker production at other times. The

advantage of the current market situation is that there is no tradeoff in market incentives. The current market is rewarding any type of forage-based production so it makes little difference if a producer sells weaned calves, retained feeders or runs stocker in place of cows. For stocker producers, the market signals that much of the time in recent years limited feasible stocker systems to a narrow set of production (e.g. small beginning weights and limited total weight gain) have been replaced by expanded flexibility to choose a wider range of beginning weights. There is more opportunity to own cattle longer and take them to higher weights.

In the current environment, almost anything works and producers should focus on what works best for them. Producers can choose production systems where they have the greatest production advantage and the greatest opportunity for profits. High prices are no guarantee of profitability but high prices, combined with production flexibility gives producer more opportunity to control their fate. Cost of production will certainly be higher and input markets are volatile. Producers must evaluate input use carefully and be prepared to adjust production practices accordingly. Business as usual now means not necessarily doing things the same old way. For example, the value of reducing death loss by one calf is significantly more at today's prices, which means that the health program requires additional attention. High fertilizer and fuel prices make pasture and hay management more important. And high feed cost makes supplement management critical.

I would not say that there are no marketing challenges but a focus on productivity, efficiency and production costs will pay the greatest dividends in this unprecedented market environment. Forage is worth more now and producers who can grow and manage forage most efficiently and market that forage efficiently through cattle will benefit the most from the current market situation.

## **Early Weaning for the Beef Herd**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

This article could probably be titled "What to Do If All Else Fails". Certainly no one ever plans to find himself in a drought, short of forage, and with a group of cows too thin to breed. It does happen, however, and early weaning of calves at six to eight weeks of age is an effective way to get high rebreeding rates, even in very thin cows. Although early weaning is certainly not advocated for all producers all of the time, it can provide an attractive alternative in certain situations such as drought, when large amounts of purchased forage would be necessary to maintain a cow herd through to normal weaning time or when cows are already too thin to rebreed. Studies at Oklahoma State University show that early-weaned calves can be efficiently raised to a normal weaning weight with minimal labor and facilities. The procedure used at OSU is outlined here.

## *Why Early Weaning Works*

Lactation roughly doubles the daily energy and protein requirement for a typical beef cow. Removing the calf at six to eight weeks into lactation obviously reduces the quantity and quality of forage needed to maintain the cow herd. Reasons for improved rebreeding after early weaning involve more than nutrition, however. Research has shown that the removal of the nursing calf and therefore the removal of stimuli of the nerves in the udder causes hormonal changes in the cows that allow estrus cycles to begin. Estrus activity can then be induced in cows too thin to cycle while still suckling a calf.

## *Age for Early Weaning*

In order to maintain a 365 day calving interval, calves should be early weaned at less than 80 days of age. About 40 days of age may be a practical minimum for early weaning in beef herds. Calves at least 40 days old do not require milk replacers in the ration and are old enough to eat dry feed. Since smaller and younger calves may have difficulty competing for feed and water, the age range in any given group of early-weaned calves should be kept as narrow as possible.

## *Managing the Early Weaned Calf*

The procedures described in this section were developed from three studies conducted at the Range Cow Research Center at Oklahoma State University. Two studies were conducted with spring-born calves early weaned in April and May while the third study involved fall-born calves early weaned in December.

The most critical time is the first two weeks after early weaning. Calves must overcome the stress of weaning and learn to eat feed very quickly. However, with good management to reduce stress and to provide palatable feed, early weaning is not as risky as might first be feared.

At the time of early weaning, all calves should be vaccinated for blackleg and malignant edema. Consult your veterinarian for other suggested vaccinations. It is probably a good idea to vaccinate two weeks prior to early weaning anyway because immunity will be established by weaning time and calves will not be subjected to the added stress associated with vaccines, injections and handling at weaning time. All calves not intended for breeding replacements or destined to “all-natural” programs could be implanted.

Calves should be first placed in a small pen with some type of shelter available. Small pens are preferred over larger lots because large lots or traps encourage fence walking and make it more difficult for calves to find feed and water. The feed bunk and water source need to be easily

accessible and recognizable.

Previously, the OSU early weaning program utilized three weaning rations starting with a high concentrate ration for the first few days when feed intake is very low. More research has shown that performance is better when a single ration is used throughout. This also makes management of the program much easier. Example rations for early-weaned calves can be found in the Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet [ANSI-3031, “Nutrition and Management Considerations for Preconditioning Home Raised Beef Calves.”](http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1957/ANSI-3031web.pdf) The URL is: <http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1957/ANSI-3031web.pdf> . Look specifically at Table 3 in this fact sheet.

### *Expect Improvements in Cow Performance*

Early weaning increased conception rates of very thin first-calf heifers from 50 percent to 97 percent and shortened the days to first estrus by 17 days. The mature cows were judged to be in moderate condition. All the early weaned cows rebred; while only 81 percent of the cows that raised calves rebred. Many of the cows cycled within three days of early weaning, indicating that extra bull power may be needed for a few days following early weaning.

As expected, heifers and cows whose calves were weaned early were heavier at normal weighing time than were those cows and heifers that raised calves. Since these cows are in better condition, they should require less supplemental feed during the following winter. This factor will need to be considered in the budgeting of an early weaning program.

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