Do You Want to Early Wean?

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

Midsummer means the calves should be maximizing gain at twenty to thirty pounds per week. Recent seasonal rains have made the cows walking milk machines, which should continue as long as there is adequate forage quantity and quality.

Typically, calves remain with the cows for 30 weeks, with total calf body weight in excess of 550 pounds by the time fall weaning comes around. These calves are primed and ready to enter the market channel, hopefully bringing profit for the producer as well as potential buyers.

Even though summer seems to just be settling in, plans need to be made now for late summer and fall cattle processing, particularly for those who may be planning to wean early. Weaning age is not all that critical, but weaning management is crucial, regardless of how old the calf is.

Many opportunities are available as the Dickinson Research Extension Center starts evaluating weaning options. The Center is currently working cooperatively with South Dakota and Wyoming in evaluating the effect of early weaning on cow-calf operations.

Douglas Landblom, DREC animal scientist, is leading local efforts. He is evaluating early weaning versus conventional weaning. Landblom notes the importance of maintaining a systems approach when managing an operation, because it is very difficult to determine the weaning impacts on the total operation. For example, the time of weaning will impact the finishing date while the finishing date has a strong connection to the seasonal market price, i.e. carcass value on the rail.

Decisions made today may have significant income consequences at a later date. Cost containment plays a big role in balancing the checkbook. Also, weaning time may impact cow body weight and condition. Additionally, Landblom notes forage utilization may change when calves are removed from the pasture versus when the cows and calves remain on pasture.

In dry or wet years, depending on what part of the region the operation is in, winter hay needs to be adjusted. The early weaning study is seeking answers to many questions.

For now, we do know that calves can be early weaned, and they will perform similar to calves weaned later in the fall. Last yearís early weaned calves had an average daily gain of over three pounds in the backgrounding lots and performed adequately in the feedlot. Although the feedlot performance has been fine, and the bulk of the steers were finished in the April and May time frame, one steer still remains in the early wean group.

Limited DREC data shows early weaning has two huge challenges: death loss and time in the feedlot.

The calves performed well, but two dead calves in the feedlot out of 40 will impact the bottom line. This may be a small data set and a bit of poor luck, but still, the bulk of a pen of calves only pays the bills; the profit is in the few that remain after all the bills have been paid. This is when the reality of death loss hits home.

The other difficulty with early weaning is time in the feedlot. The calf has to bear the costs of yardage and labor at generally a higher rate than the cow-calf producer would charge the cow-calf operation. These costs now become real, and the producer needs to mail a check to whoever is feeding the calf.

The results should be interesting. For now, however, get those calves vaccinated, and if you are early weaning, get them vaccinated now.

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at *www.BeefTalk.com*. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to *www.CHAPS2000.com* on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0204.

Two Key Questions for Early Weaning Options

1. Are the calves adequately vaccinated to withstand the upcoming weaning and processing stress?
2. Will the carcass value justify the additional labor and yardage charges due to increased days of feed?