



## BeefTalk 679: Plan Ahead to Wean Stress-free Calves

### SUPPORTING MATERIALS



*Having stress-free calves starts a long time before weaning by selecting the right genetics.*

Where did the calves go? Are they all here? It never seems to fail that when the crew goes out to gather the cow-calf pairs, we are short one. The obvious response is: Any dead ones? The crew looks wry-faced and reasserts that they can tell a dead calf, so no, they did not find a dead calf!

The day just became a long one because the anticipated work session now includes an extended ride to find the missing calf. It is not always a calf that goes missing. It could be a yearling or bull. In fact, sometimes the center actually has more cattle gathered than were turned out. A pair or two from the neighbor are present.

Either way, one can't let a 900-pound yearling not show up. The value is easily more than \$1,300, so it certainly is worth reclaiming. The steer eventually was found in with the neighbor's cattle. So much for lecturing people about building good fences.

When it comes to counting and valuing inventory, ranching often slips, so the current inventory to the absolute cow is not known. Although missing cattle bring on some anxiety, they usually are found or simply come back home.

Upcoming fall cattle work is a good time to account for inventory and search for any missing or extra calves. As the cooler fall days arrive, a day will not go by when producers are not physically or at least mentally sorting and working calves. The key to successful fall management and inventory is the ability to slowly record, count and wean a calf from summer pasture to a backgrounding lot or feed yard.

This seems like a very logical process, but anyone who has tried to settle down a set of bawling calves knows otherwise.



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Perhaps the real target in weaning is removing those calves that walk away from the cow herd and start eating on their own and never look back. Those calves are less likely to end up in a sick pen because of less stress, so it is not only the vaccinations they have received that assure their health.

Although much of the focus of preparing calves for weaning is on vaccination protocols, producers never can lose sight that, in reality, stress is the big culprit, so the absolute need to eliminate stress in the operation is critical.

Having stress-free calves starts a long time before weaning by selecting the right genetics. It starts by selecting gentle replacement heifers and allowing only civil, well-behaved heifers into the cow herd. It also means using bulls that have a similar acceptable attitude, which means no rodeo bulls allowed.

As the cows are calved, one needs to acclimate the calves to a human presence. As the calving season slowly gives way to summer grazing, allow for the exposure to humans, horses or paraphernalia that we drag with us as we monitor the calves. Always be relaxed while checking the cows and calves. There is no need to wave or shout.

Is there an occasional treat that has the cows looking forward to a visit from the producer? The center routinely carries some cow treats in the pickup.

Always ask if any trip through the chute is a reasonable experience. Put aside all the hot shots, whips and sticks. In fact, throw those hot shots away. Only use approved handling paddles.

Make sure the upcoming fall work sessions are planned to allow for the appropriate time for all the work to be done. Provide lunch and other breaks so coworkers keep healthy attitudes about the day's workload. Tired and hungry crews get ornery, so listen to what the crew has to say. Also, ask yourself if the day is a serious cattle day or a fun day for riders at the expense of the cattle.

The overriding point is that stressed calves respond badly to weaning. Calves that are being fed for the first time should only see the feed and not fear the person doing the feeding. That fear never should have been put in the calf. I know there are those who mumble and simply can't give up their old ways. In many cases, those old ways are good, but always ask yourself: Am I creating fear and stress by fighting these calves? If so, those old ways aren't good. There are better ways to acclimate calves to interacting with people.

Granted, many calves are raised in wide open-spaces, so they don't interact with people. Even then, let's make sure their first interaction is reasonable and something we would like to experience and write home to mom about.

Yes, a little excitement in life is all right, but why not use the extra money you make on a good set of stress-free calves to take a well-earned family vacation?

May you find all your ear tags.

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