

November 8, 2001



BeefTalk: Sleeping With the Calves

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Calves: If you take care of them, they will take care of you. Weaning time is here--and this year so is nice weather. Good weather, however, doesn't always mean problem-free weaning. Weaning is stressful for calves regardless of the weather, but proper preparation can reduce the stress level.

Cattle seem to move every direction. Cows and calves come in, and cows go out leaving the calves to acclimate to bunks and waters. In all my years of working with beef producers, the most frequent rationale for not implementing new technology or old technology like weighing calves is simply the difficulty in handling cattle.

Because all operations need to wean calves, the implication is that all

calves are handled. Now is the time to sit back and evaluate a day's efforts at working calves. Was it a good day or bad day? Do you look forward to weaning or is weaning one of those days you dread? What seemed to cause the most problems?

I would like to review some of the common problems associated with handling cattle and share insight provided from Temple Grandin's Web site (www.grandin.com). Temple Grandin is a well-known expert on livestock behavior from Colorado State University and lists several key areas and principles to be concerned about when cattle are handled.

Light and noise levels are important in any work facility. What is the noise level (commonly called commotion) around your working facility? Just how much commotion is around the chute? Noise will make the cattle uneasy. How well-lighted is your working area? With outdoor facilities, are there shadows that cause confusion? Cattle do not see or hear the world as we do.

Grandin notes that cattle have wide angle vision but poor depth vision, so better lighting is important. Moving calves from a brightly lighted outside into a dimly lighted inside can make cattle uneasy and create difficulty. Sit back and look at your working facility. Are there objects like coffee cups, empty bottles, chains, shiny metals, poor footing or pieces of yesterday laying around? These things create the general atmosphere and commotion that translate into stress in cattle.

How do you feel walking through a Halloween-style haunted house, not sure of what the next step will be. (I don't even go in them.) So think of those calves, escorted off quiet pastures and plunked right into the middle of confusion. Think of visiting a busy carnival at night with all the lights

flashing, lots of people and you have a migraine headache. Proper cattle handling systems are absolutely essential for technology advancement within the cow-calf segment of the industry.

Grandin goes on to note that understanding basic cattle behavior is critical to making even the best handling system work. Understanding the concepts of the flight zone, herding instinct and dominance make an average cattle handler a great cattle handler.

For the Dickinson Research Extension Center, most of our calves have experienced several handling opportunities. Yet, we still work to assure that the surroundings are pleasant and comfortable to the newly weaned calves. This is critical to their health and well being. A proper vaccination program is essential to maintaining the health of the calf, but even good vaccination protocols can be over whelmed by environmental or management deficiencies.

If in doubt, grab your sleeping bag and bed down with the calves for the night. Don't bring a pillow or snacks and keep your socks on your feet. If the morning brings a refreshing new day and you are anxious for breakfast, welcome to the cattle business. If you bones ache and the thought of food disgusts you, get some help--not for you but for your calves. After all, if you take care of the calves, they will take care of you.

May you find all your ear tags.

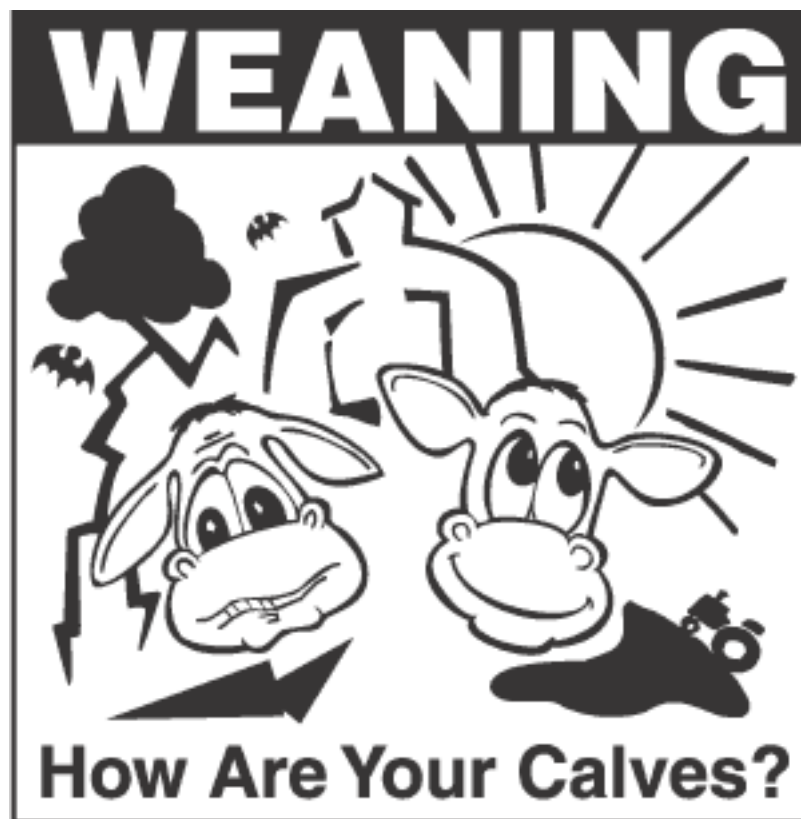
Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this

column, refer to BT0064.

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