

## Early Weaning Can Alleviate Feed Management Concerns

By Kris Ringwall  
Extension Beef Specialist  
NDSU Extension Service



Managing feed during periods of environmental stress like drought is a major task. Deciding where to allocate the feed to the cow or the calf is an important decision. Yet, the most important component of feed management is a thorough understanding of nutritional requirements of all classes of beef cattle.

Managing feed involves more than an accurate inventory accounting. Periods of stress bring to the forefront the need for good planning. There are many questions and scenarios.

For instance, should a producer feed cows to gain weight and improve condition (i.e., get fatter) while dry or not nursing a calf? The contrasting question would be, should a producer feed cows to only maintain weight and condition while dry or not nursing a calf, saving feed for post calving?

The logic for putting some fat on a cow relates to how to best compensate for the vagaries of the weather as it influences the cow's survival. The logic to not putting condition on in the fall but rather providing high quality feed to the lactating cow, which can be converted directly into milk and calf gain, would be very popular in dairy circles. The real answer for beef cows is somewhere in the middle. The same is true now in regard to early weaning. Current work would indicate calves can be weaned at a very young age. Dairy producers have shown that.

In beef production, I'm not sure if any research directly compares the routine early-weaning of beef calves to weaning seven-month-old calves in regards to total system efficiency. But I did find a research project on early weaning conducted in 1980 by North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center animal scientists Jim Nelson and Doug Landblom,

Yet, as somewhat of an old-schooler, I fundamentally believe a calf should spend the summer with its mother, grazing and growing at a natural rate and experiencing the vagaries of life. But, the meaning of life is to adapt when needed. Early weaning strategies can be implemented to reduce the overall feed intake of the cow during drought and focus higher quality feed directly to the calf.

Pasture conditions this year are much like those in

1980, when Nelson and Landblom began the two-year study. (Did you know 1980 was the driest year on record with only 2.03 inches of rain?) Nelson and Landblom developed five recommendations for early weaning calves. Calves should be:

- Σ At least 35 days old.
- Σ Supplied with a highly palatable ration high in protein, available energy, vitamins and minerals.
- Σ Exposed to the ration two to three weeks before they are weaned.
- Σ Vaccinated with all the standard vaccines two to three weeks before weaning.
- Σ Monitored regularly for any early indications of health problems.

The calves in the 1980s study ranged in age from 38 to 105 days of age. The average weight at weaning across both years of the trial was 155 pounds. The average gain to 205 days of age was 2.1 pounds per day with a feed efficiency of 5.3 pounds of feed per pound of gain.

There were few problems in this set of calves. Two calves were treated for respiratory problems. One suffered from reoccurring bloat. All three calves were removed from the trial. The most annoying problem was flies and an outbreak of pink eye the first year of the trial.

Today, more than 20 years later, the two problems in feedlots that stand out today are bloat and respiratory problems. We do the same—the cattle are removed or lifted out of the pen, and we lose our shirts every time. If I ask the ranch crew if we should bring the cattle home early, they respond in unison, "Not until those damn flies are gone."

So life goes on, wean the calves, save some feed and . . . I can't help but wonder, are flies one of those overlooked value added concepts? May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.BeefTalk.com](http://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](http://www.CHAPS2000.com) on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0102.

---

## Performance of Early-Weaned Calves NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center

Age:	38-105 days
Average weight at weaning:	155 pounds
Average daily gain to 205 days of age:	2.1 pounds
Average feed efficiency:	5.3 pounds of feed per pound of gain
Dead calves:	0
Loser calves:	3
Estimated fly production:	255 trillion