navigation

Links

- News Home
- Columns
- Archives

Feeds

- All News RSS
- BeefTalk RSS
- Dairy Focus RSS
- Prairie Fare RSS
- Economics RSS
- Renewable Accounts RSS
- Small-business Savvy RSS

Twitter

- On Twitter follow NDSU Ag News

BeefTalk: Wean Early and Save 25 Percent of Pasture Forage

Research shows early weaning has significant benefits.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Images

Impacts of Weaning Period

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center

	Early Weaning	Normal Weaning
Cow body weight		
August	1,296	1,333
November	1,311	1,197
Impacts	**+15**	**-136**
Cow body condition score		
August	5.2	5.3
November	6.1	4.7
Impacts	**+0.9**	**-0.6**

"Effects of Weaning Date and Retained Ownership on Cattle Performance and Forage Disappearance in Spring Calving Beef Systems" by D.G. Landblom, S. Paisley, P. Johnson, R. Gates, S.W. Fausti and H.H. Patterson

Impacts of Weaning Period

Did you know you can save more than 25 percent of available forage by weaning calves early?

The current dryness affecting the land has caused all livestock producers to review options. For some in a drought situation, the only real solution is rain. But producers need to take charge, whether the season is dry or wet.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center has and will continue to manage during dry times. The center is in a semiarid climate and dryness is not a stranger.

columns

BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Wean Early and Save 25 Percent of Pasture Forage (2017-06-08) Research shows early weaning has significant benefits. FULL STORY

Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Should You Toss the Food or Eat It? (2017-06-08) Dates on food packages are quality dates, not expiration dates. FULL STORY

Managing grazing time and stocking rate is critical. As a result, the center has measured available biomass on the range when cows have their calves removed in mid-August versus early November.

The thought is that removing calves would lessen the impact on the production unit during times when rain is scarce. First, no drought plan works if there is no grazing plan to start with.

To begin, a properly designed grazing system that does not put undue pressure on grass is a priority. While those wetter-than-average years tempt producers to increase stocking numbers, years like this remind us overstocking is never a good idea. Stick to the properly planned grazing system and appropriate adjustments.

This discussion is not about what grazing system is best, though. The main point is to have a grazing system.

The next step is to plan on orderly herd reductions that fit the operation. Today, I want to focus on early weaning as an option to manage dry pastures later this summer.

Center research has shown weaning calves in August lowers the nutritional requirements of the cow herd because dry cows eat less than lactating cows. Center animal scientist Doug Landblom notes "… weaning calves early has a positive

impact on growth and efficiency during the backgrounding phase, improves cow body condition score, reduces range forage utilization, and shortens the lifetime feeding period of steers held for retained ownership."

Data collected by Landblom showed significant benefits of early weaning. At the center, the body weight of cows whose calves were weaned in mid-August was 1,296 pounds in August and the cows still weighed 1,311 pounds in November. Cows with calves not weaned early weighed 1,333 pounds in August but lost significant weight nursing calves on dry pasture and weighed 1,197 pounds in November.

In other words, the cows with calves that were weaned early gained 15 pounds and utilized 28 percent less forage biomass than the cows whose calves were not weaned early. The cows with calves that were not weaned early lost 136 pounds of body weight.

Wow! Cows with August-weaned calves gained weight and saved a significant amount of valuable feed. Cows with traditionally weaned calves lost weight while consuming more feed.

The data also reflected a significant decrease in body condition score for the cows: 6.1 for the cows with calves that were weaned early and 4.7 for the cows with calves that were not weaned until November. This is a difference of almost a 1.5 body

score less for the cows with calves that were weaned traditionally.

The focus today is the cow. In a dry year, the logic would be to do some culling, getting poorer cows off the pastures. But before culling too deeply, consider pulling the calves off the cows and simply leaving the cows on pasture.

If the year continues to be dry, the cows may not perform as well as the cows in Landblom's study at the center, but we have no reason to believe they would not be better off than the cows with calves at their side. The logic is that calves can be hauled to the feed easier than the cows, so keep the good cows on pasture and move the calves to a more plentiful and reasonable feed source.

One point of caution: Although the early weaned calves perform very well postweaning, lightweight calves still do not bring enough dollars to offset the production costs associated with the cow.

The center calves weighed just shy of 400 pounds in August. A 400-pound calf has tremendous potential to grow once feed is located and appropriate arrangements made. The question of selling the calf or retaining ownership needs to be asked.

Retaining ownership is an established concept, but for many, a new concept. In fact, many producers are very uneasy with the additional risk of owning calves once the calves have left the control of the

home operation. But still, fast-gaining calves with good genetics designed for premiums on the rail make exploring the concept worthwhile.

More on that later. Let's return to where we started. By weaning calves early, a producer can save more than 25 percent of available forage in a dry year. That is a great tool to have in the management plan and may very well need to be implemented this year.

As with any drought management tool, do not wait until forage availability is critical for the herd. Implement drought plans sooner than later. More next time.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu.

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Attachments

PDF - Impacts of Weaning Period

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EPS - Impacts of Weaning Period

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