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BeefTalk: Prepare for Early Weaning



Early weaning can save more than 25 percent of available summer pasture forage.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

The impact of drought is dominating the news, but producers need to be careful to not overreact.

The best reaction is to strengthen the grazing plan and have a drought response plan. Every grazing day brings an opportunity for rain - and rain will come - but those days with no rain and heat still can cause a significant decrease in available forage. Do not wait until forage availability is critical to implement a drought response.

Consider all the options available and select those

Images

Backgrounding Performance of Weaned Steers		
NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center		
	Early Weaned*	Traditionally Weaned
Number of steers	68	66
Days on feed	52.5	52.5
Start weight (pounds)	411	576
End weight (pounds)	592	741
Average daily gain (pounds)	3.4	3.1
Feed per pound of gain	10.7	14.8

* Mid-August calves were approximately three months younger at the conclusion of the backgrounding phase.

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

Backgrounding Performance of Weaned Steers

columns

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Prepare for Early Weaning](#) (2017-06-15) Early weaning can save more than 25 percent of available summer pasture forage. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Are Rhubarb and Tomatoes Fruits or Vegetables?](#) (2017-06-15) Whether produce is a fruit or veggie often depends on your perspective and how you use it. [FULL STORY](#)

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that will change management first. If a change in management does not help significantly, then proceed to initiate a herd-reduction strategy.

A management option that could prove to be very helpful is early weaning of calves. Producers can save more than 25 percent of available summer pasture forage with early weaning. This tool may very well need to be implemented this year, depending on just where timely rains fall.

Also, keep in mind that many areas of the country are not dry, so pastures and feed are available somewhere.

Early weaning means a reduction in grazing cattle numbers, which means less forage is needed. This reduction is accomplished by a physical reduction in calf numbers, as well as a change in the nutritional requirements of the cows that continue grazing. Essentially, weaning calves early reduces physical numbers, stops lactation in the cow and lowers the nutritional requirements of the cows.

Producers often ask this question: "How well do the calves do if they are weaned early?" The Dickinson Research Extension Center has weaned calves early, and center research has shown early weaned calves performed well.

Center animal scientist Doug Landblom notes "... weaning calves early has a positive impact on growth and efficiency during the backgrounding phase." Data collected by Landblom utilized calves

that weighed around 400 pounds in mid-August.

Keep in mind that a standard brief acclimation period for all weaned calves takes place at the center, and then the calves are moved to a backgrounding program for moderate gain. Because of the acclimation period, weaning weights and weights at the start of backgrounding are different.

The early weaned calves weighed 411 pounds at the start of backgrounding following the brief acclimation period. The calves began the backgrounding program in late August. The traditionally weaned calves also were acclimated to backgrounding lots. They weighed 576 pounds at the start of the background period in late fall.

At the end of a 52-day backgrounding period for both groups (but at different times), the early weaned calves weighed 592 pounds (early October) and the traditionally weaned calves weighed 741 pounds (late December). Keep in mind that the mid-August calves would have been approximately three months younger at the conclusion of the backgrounding phase.

The average daily gain actually was greater for the early weaned calves, at 3.4 pounds per day during the backgrounding period, while the average daily gain for the traditionally weaned calves was 3.1 pounds per day. The research data showed the feed per pound of gain was 10.7 pounds of feed

per pound of gain for the early weaned calves during their backgrounding phase and 14.8 pounds of feed per pound of gain for the traditionally weaned calves.

Although calf weaning still would be a ways off, most March- and April-born calves are best left on the cow today. But if the weather remains dry, August weaning is certainly an option.

Here are some things to think about because mid-August will be here soon and the calves could be ready to wean early:

- Are facilities ready to receive the calves?
- Can you gather the pairs without additional stress on the cows and calves?
- Is help available to manage the newly weaned calves?
- Are feed and water of the quality a newly weaned calf would be excited to consume?
- Have you purchased the ration ingredients?
- Have you contracted for hay or at least found a place to buy it?
- Have you negotiated and locked in the price of feed resources?

All these questions and more should have affirmative answers before initiating early weaning. Early calf weaning means you need to start a calf vaccination program early, with the first

vaccinations implemented by early to mid-July if the calves are going to come home mid-August.

Given the checklist of questions, most producers would view these as standard management questions and certainly doable. For the most part, only the timing of the management option is changed.

Early weaning of calves is a very real option for cattle producers. As with any management option, if this is the first time you are going to background, expect some issues. But don't simply sell the calves. Try feeding them.

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](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



[PDF - Backgrounding Performance of](#)

Weaned Steers

(NDSU_Extension_Service_BeefTalk_061517.pdf -
20.11 Kb)



EPS - Backgrounding Performance of

Weaned Steers

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