

## Early Weaning is Certainly a Viable Option in Drought Conditions

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On Aug. 9, 2006, the Dickinson Research Extension Center shipped its first load of early weaned calves to Scottsbluff, Neb. The day was hot, but not unbearable. The cows were put back to pasture after ultrasounding for pregnancy.

The cows were bred well. Only five cows of the 48 in the group were not detected as pregnant. That doesn't mean they were not pregnant; it simply means they could have been late and are under the detection age for ultrasounding. The other 43 cows were at least a month along in their pregnancy.

The bulls will be heading to town. All should break the ton mark for weight and hopefully will bring in the low- to mid-\$60 range. Given the current competition for a bite of grass, the check should be good. The corrals will breathe a sigh of relief because they do not have to hold another set of bull reacquaintance sessions.

The early weaning project is a two-year study involving 505 cow-calf pairs from the NDSU-DREC, South Dakota State University Antelope Research Station and the University of Wyoming Beef Unit. By now, the calves should be getting acclimated in their new home.

Doug Landblom, DREC animal scientist, is the lead author of the study, which reported first-year results in the 2006 NDSU-DREC annual report. Landblom and colleagues investigated many variables in the study.

The objective of the study was to evaluate the effects of mid-August weaning versus more traditional early November weaning on cow and calf production traits, forage utilization and economic returns. The study revealed weaning calves early from spring-calving cows can have multiple impacts on beef systems.

The calves were penned relative to their individual weight and body condition score. In the study, calves were weaned either at an average of 140 days of age in August or at an average of 215 days of age in November. The mother cows grazed native range between the two weaning dates.

Calves from the North and South Dakota cow herds

were finished in Nebraska, while the Wyoming calves were finished in Wyoming. Not all locations responded the same. For purposes of practical discussion, overall, the cows that had calves weaned in August lost less weight than the November-weaned cows. The Dakota cows' body condition score was improved for August-weaned cows versus the November-weaned cows, but not for the Wyoming cows.

This study was especially appropriate this year because of the drought conditions that exist. Data collected in the first year of the study showed the quantity of forage that disappeared was reduced by more than 27 percent when calves were weaned in August.

During the backgrounding feedlot phase, the performance of August-weaned steers from North Dakota had greater average daily gain than the November-weaned calves. Both North and South Dakota steers were more feed efficient during backgrounding.

In the finishing phase, August-weaned steers grew slower, but were more efficient. On average, at all locations, November-weaned steers entered the feedlot heavier and required fewer days on feed to harvest, but August-weaned steers were 46 days younger at harvest.

Landblom and his associates concluded weaning spring-born calves early reduced forage utilization, improved cow body weight and body condition score, improved backgrounding performance and finishing feed efficiency, reduced the number of days from birth to harvest and yielded similar finishing performance.

The bottom line is don't be afraid to early wean calves. Make sure you get with a feedlot and nutritionist and do it right.

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 BT0312.

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“Forage biomass disappearance,  
between weaning dates, was  
reduced by 27.7 percent when  
calves were August weaned”  
(versus November weaned).

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Doug Landblom, NDSU-DREC Animal Scientist