



Wean with care

This is the season when calves bawl and cows rush about calling for them in vain. If it sounds sad, it can be, for man and beast. But with a little planning, this necessary parting of bovine mother and child can bring scarcely a moo of concern.

Reasons to minimize stress at weaning are many: Better subsequent calf performance and grade, maintenance of the full herd inventory, enhanced animal well being, less wear on facilities and greater safety for all.

A lot can go wrong when weaning is poorly planned or executed in poor facilities. One of the worst possibilities is failure to contain cattle in a corral. Design will determine whether any escapees are in a secondary corral, back in the home pasture, in the neighbor's or out on the road.

Cattle must be familiar with the corral before weaning. Perhaps it could be a source of water, and you can build "leadership" by getting dominant animals hooked on grain or flakes of alfalfa fed in the corral.

Let's say you minimize the risk of inventory loss with buffer pens around the corral, and lead cattle in rather than drive them. Any branding, castration, dehorning and initial vaccinations should have been done before weaning—these can include brucellosis vaccines for heifers. Consult your veterinarian to develop a health plan to fit your herd. In most cases, you will need to "work" the calves with booster vaccines at weaning to keep them healthy. That means sorting and secure restraint.

Make sure to avoid the worst turn of fate: injury. Check out the worthiness of your corral, holding pens, gates, sorting and crowding areas. Reinforce or replace anything questionable. Evaluate the sorting plan. Will you have at least some experienced helpers who are familiar with your facility and plan?

Sort by allowing only cows to exit a pen. Use body position and mobile sorting panels for greater efficiency and protection from kicks. Keep a second gate closed and release groups of cows periodically.

Once calves are separated, crowd several together at the base of the chute alley. Use sturdy, hinged gates and direct calves' heads into the alley with extended sorting tools such as wands or even brooms. Avoid the stress of hitting or shocking the calves, and reserve your voice for communication with helpers.

In some facilities, shots may be administered in the neck region without putting each calf in the head gate or chute. However, weaning is an excellent time to weigh individuals and tie that information to the mother cows. It's also a good time to further evaluate replacement heifer prospects.

Now that cows and calves have parted, one of the most important goals is to keep them separated with as little stress as possible. If you have high-quality, well-fenced pasture, consider turning calves out and removing cows to another farm for pregnancy evaluation. After a few days of moderate restraint, they can live on crop residue at least until winter.

Depending on resources, you may be able to turn calves and cows into adjacent grazing paddocks where fence line contact relieves much anxiety. Some producers lacking a division fence may apply self-weaning nose rings and let calves stay with cows until a later gathering when separation is the only agenda.

Some operations remove calves to another farm with dry lot pens isolated from the cowherd. If that's the plan, make sure calves have experience with similar harvested feed and waterers. Weaning calves before sale gives you more marketing options, but don't bother unless you can do it for several weeks rather than days.

A week away from the cows will technically accomplish weaning. But movement on to a sale or feedlot at that time can challenge the best health program, and postweaning shrink will be maximized. Forty-five days is the target for most preconditioning lot programs, so look at your calendar and plan accordingly.

Coordinate the next step with your auction manager so that calves may sell in a preconditioned breed-type sale, or with your feeding partner so that calves arrive when he has a pen ready and can continue to build on what you have accomplished. Weaning done right is an opportunity for profit.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll take a closer look at producer education options. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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