

OSU EXTENSION NEWS

Addressing calf health

Spring calving herds across the state and Pittsburg County will soon be planning to wean the calves. Some producers may wean the calves from young or thin cows during September in order to regain some body condition before winter adds to the nutrient requirements. However, many herds will wean at the more traditional times of late October to early November.



David Cantrell
OSU EXTENSION

Methods to reduce stress on the calves have become of great interest to producers. Therefore, weaning strategies have been studied in recent years. California researchers weaned calves with only a fence (Fenceline) separating them from their dams. These were compared to calves weaned to totally separate (Separate) from dams. The Separate Calves could not see or hear their dams. Calf behaviors were monitored for five days following weaning. Fenceline calves and cows spent approximately 60 percent and 40 percent of their time, respectively within 10 feet of the fence during the first two days. During the first three days, Fenceline calves bawled and walked less, and ate and rested more, but these differences disappeared by the fourth day. All calves were managed together starting 7 days after weaning. After two weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 23 pounds more than Separate calves. This difference persisted since, after 10 weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 110 pounds (1.57 lb/day), compared to 84 pounds (1.20 lb/day) for Separate calves. There was no report of any differences in sickness, but calves that eat more during the first days after weaning should stay healthier. A Michigan State study (Buskirk, 2007) reported that fenceline-weaned calves gained more weight and had lower stress factors in the blood during the first 2 weeks after weaning than did traditionally weaned calves. The differences in weight gain however, were not retained throughout the duration of that study. An Ohio State University study indicated that fenceline calves had a lower incidence of respiratory diseases.

Producers that have tried fenceline weaning will remind us that it takes good, well maintained fences and adequate water supplies for both sides of the fence. Fencing should be adequate to keep the calves and cows separate. One option is to use a five-strand barbed wire fence combined with a single strand of electric fence offset from the main fence. You may need this "hot" wire on both sides of the fence. Remember, a large number of cattle are going to be congregated in a small area for several days. Therefore water availability for both cows and calves is critical. Start the process with the cow and calf pairs in the pasture where the calves will be allowed to stay after weaning. They will be accustomed to the water sources and how to drink from them. This should reduce the risk of dehydration after weaning. Some producers have preferred to place a yearling or a non-lactating cow without a calf in the weaning pasture to lead calves to the water source.

To wean and background, even for short periods, fenceline weaning should be considered. Source: Price, et al. 2003. Fenceline contact of beef calves with their dams at weaning reduced the negative effects of separation on behavior and growth rate. *J Anim Sci* 81: 116-121.