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December 2003

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Hill, Harlow W., "Early and Fence Line Weaning of Calves: Producers' Experience" (2003). *Range Beef Cow Symposium*. 71.
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.....Proceedings, The Range Beef Cow Symposium XVIII
December 9, 10, and 11, 2003, Mitchell, Nebraska

EARLY AND FENCE LINE WEANING OF CALVES: producers' experience

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INTRODUCTION

The reason I have been invited to speak today is because of our success with our early weaning program at Maddux Cattle Company for the last several years. I grew up in the western Sand Hills around Alliance, Nebraska. In the Sand Hills, the tradition was to wean in November. Once or twice I can remember us weaning early so we weaned in October. I left there 25 years ago and came to Maddux Cattle Company in southwestern Nebraska owned by Jack Maddux. I came on the job the 15th of September and the calves were already weaned. I shook my head and thought to myself, cattle must be different down here. I sure hope the calves don't get sick and die from being weaned too early. Well this is the beginning of a long story but I will try to cut it short. Every year we just keep weaning a little earlier. Every year at calving time the standing question is "Jack, can we let the calves have a little colostrum before we wean??"

EARLY WEANING DATES

As I was saying 25 years ago we were weaning calves in September. The last 2 years we have started weaning the last week in May and finish by the end of June. These calves are born from February 1st to the last of April. We usually start weaning the 2-year-old's calves first since they are the first to be born, we then go on to the oldest cows' calves and finish up with youngest calves last. The last several years we have had 4 different groups to get the weaning done.

The weaning weights on the calves for the last 3 years are as follows.

Year	Dates Weaned	Weaning Weight	Finished Date	Finished Weight
2001	June 20-July 11	350 lbs.	April 11 –May 16	1175 lbs.
2002	May 26-June 20	250 lbs.	March 25 – April 30	1250 lbs.
2003	May 27-June 27	300 lbs.	Projected Finish Date: April 15	1250 lbs.

REASONS FOR EARLY WEANING

Let me go into some of the reasons why we have moved toward earlier weaning. The number one reason is our whole operation is pointed toward April fairs, so our thought is the sooner we get these calves on feed, the sooner they will be finished. This means the cattle will be finished at about 13 months of age.

The second reason is to stretch our grass as far as we can. If we have no calves on grass, we can have more cows. It also simplifies our grass management, because it is easier to move dry cows from pasture to pasture than pairs. Also by having the calves off of the cows, it is easy to put flesh back on the cows to go into winter. It isn't very often that you can put flesh on cows while on cornstalks.

We have had to limit feed all or part of our herd for the last 4 years because of the drought. By having the calves off of the cows, it cheapens the ration considerably while limit feeding the cows.

Another big reason for early weaning is if you wean early enough you can take advantage of the calves passive immunity acquired from the cow's colostrum.

HOW WE WEAN OUR CALVES

Now that I have gone thru the reasons why we wean early, let me tell you how we wean our calves. The last couple of years we have started weaning around the 25th of May. If we have the chance, the time and the grass, we like to feed the weaning ration to the cow and calves a day or two before we pull the calves. This helps get the calves started on feed a little quicker.

We have 2 places that we have weaned calves in the last few years. One is on 340 acres of irrigated grass. The other is on sub-irrigated meadows. On the sub-irrigated meadows we have a five-wire electric fence on one side of the meadow. We put the cows on one side of the fence and the calves on the other side. We have had some of them get back together, but it is not a big deal to re-sort them.

The irrigated grass is where we weaned all of our calves this year (about 2,300 head on 340 acres) mainly because we were short of help. What we do on the irrigated grass is lock the cows up in a dry lot and feed them a short ration of silage. Then turn the calves out on the irrigated grass. We also have bunks scattered around on the grass and near the dry lot where the cows are being kept. The bunks are filled with a ration of about 2/3 corn gluten and 1/3 distillers corn. This ration is so sweet a calf can't resist it. There is also trace mineral pellet in it and a pound of corn is added once they get close to 10 pounds of ration.

We keep the cows across the fence in the dry lot for about 5 or 6 days until the bawl is out of the cows. Then we herd the cows away to native grass or to another dry lot depending on the drought situation. Once we get the cows herded away, we get another group of pairs in and start weaning all over again until we are finished. As we weaned we keep adding more calves to the previous weaned calves.

It is surprising how the calves respond to weaning across from the cows. It seems about 1/3 of the calves are by the cows, 1/3 of the calves are out on the grass grazing and 1/3 of the calves are at the bunks eating. The calves seem to rotate between the 3 places and at no time seem to be very distressed. The cows are more upset then the calves are.

We are excited about the glutton and distiller ration that we have been feeding the last couple of years. It is a high protein, high energy ration that is safe to feed free choice to these weaning calves up to around 9 to 10 pounds of ration for a 300 pound calf. One thing to be aware of is these feeds have high sulfur content. A 300 to 400 pound calf should not eat much more than 10 pounds of the gluten distillers ration. If he does there is a chance of him developing some polio like symptoms. We have yet to see any problems of this, but we are cautious about it. By the time the calves have been off the cows for 4 or 5 days they are usually eating 5 or 6 pounds of the ration. They also are out grazing grass, which is a real positive when weaning calves.

VACCINATION FOR WEANING EARLY CALVES

As long as the calves are healthy, we have not been putting any vaccine in them. We try to use the passive immunity as long as we can. But if the calves do start to break with respiratory problems we will jump right in and vaccinate them usually with a viral vaccine and an atoginast pastarila vaccine. We use vaccine more as a treatment then as a preventative. Usually the vaccine cleans the problem up in 2 or 3 days.

LOW STRESS HANDLING OF CALVES

Probably the greatest reason we have been successful the last few years in weaning calves with less sickness and death loss, plus getting them to eat quickly is the fact that we are using the low stress techniques that we have learned by studying under Bud Williams. For those of you who are not familiar with Bud, he is a man that has observed and studied the instincts and characteristics of many different kinds of animals for years. From these observations he has come up with some different ways of handling animals. These techniques are all geared to managing animals with a low stress atmosphere.

Once you see what these methods produce easier handling, healthier cattle and calmer cowboys, it leaves you with the desire to hone your skills that much more. We are real believers in what this can bring our cattle and ourselves. One of the more important things that Bud emphasizes is teaching your animals to take pressure. Another thing that he talks about is the benefit of exercising the cattle to make them more content and healthy. These have been real beneficial to us with getting the calves weaned with less stress.

We have spent time visiting with our veterinarian, nutrition specialist and Bud Williams. We have decided that we need to keep the calves on green grass for 30 to 45 days before we move them to the feedlot. This seems to be working well. The calves go to the feedlot and settle in on the ration and adjust fairly quickly.

SUMMARY

In summary, we feel our early weaning has been very successful for our operation. Our reasons for weaning and the way we wean are designed to fit our operation. They may not work for everyone but they have helped to meet our goals of April fats and drought management. The use of less vaccine has been very cost effective for us. Our low stress handling has provided positive results clear from calving to slaughter. In the feed yard the calves are more content and gain faster and during slaughter we have less dark cutters which has been a problem for us in the past. I just can't say enough about how beneficial early weaning has been for Maddux Cattle Company.