



# WEANING BEEF CALVES FACT SHEET

## Making economic decisions

How you wean calves has surprising implications for profitability, which is what this article is going to address. There has been considerable research done on the timing of weaning, and methods of weaning that should be taken full advantage of when it comes to your decision-making.

## When to Wean?

The timing of weaning is an effective way to control breeding efficiency in the cowherd and feed utilisation. It is widely accepted that the timing should be a fluid thing, hinging upon seasonal conditions, and also the five-day forecast.

Generally calves are weaned between 5-9 months of age, however the actual time of weaning should depend upon feed availability and body condition of the cows predominantly.

In good seasonal conditions cows are able to milk well and still maintain body condition, and so timing of weaning is not so critical, however in periods of limited feed availability, lactating cow will quickly lose condition. Cows left to lactate on poor nutrition with a body condition score (BCS) of 2 or less will set off a detrimental chain of events for future fertility. So in these times of poor feed availability, weaning when the cows' body condition drops to a score of 2-2.5 is recommended as a cost-effective means of maintaining cow condition.

Weaning will immediately reduce the nutritional stress of lactation on the cow, which will allow her to partition energy to improving body condition for the following calving period. A target of BCS 3- 3.5 at calving is recommended to optimise milk supply and return to oestrus after calving.

In real terms, one BCS score is equal to 50 kg, so if a cow is allowed to drop below a BCS score of 2 to 1.5, it would be 84 to over 100 kilograms she will need to put on before calving again, which on poor nutrition would be a very difficult task.

In times of drought, early weaning is an economical decision. You will make a 20% saving in supplementary feed costs if you feed cows and calves separately.

Calves can be weaned as young as 70-90 days old, but one needs to decide whether to sell the calves straight off the cows, or manage the calf. Research shows that although calves weaned this early are lighter at the time of normal weaning than normally weaned calves, compensatory growth soon catches them up.

## Weaning methods

There are several commonly used methods of weaning which include; yard weaning, abrupt separation, gradual separation, and creep weaning.

Yard weaning involves penning the calves in calf-proof yards (4-6 square meters per head for 180-260kg calves) on water and good quality hay/silage or a prepared ration for 5-10days, with cows allowed to graze in adjacent paddocks to the yards.

Yard weaning is comparatively a low stress method of separation of cows and their calves, which is a very important consideration, seeing as often there are other stressors placed on the calves around weaning time such as transport, comingling and environmental changes. The weaners can also be familiarised with the yards and should be worked quietly while they are penned, slowly from corner to corner.



There is convincing evidence to choose yard weaning in almost every instance. Research also shows that weaning in small yards, with or without bunk training, results in reduced ill health and significantly improved weight gain in the feedlot.



Creep weaning, which is the process of providing calves with pelleted rations or other feed sources while they are still on their mother. Reasons for creep feeding may include; increasing calf-weaning weights, compensation for insufficient milk production by the dam, reducing nursing pressure on the dam. Convincing evidence is lacking for the cost effectiveness of creep feeding, and feed prices and labour may often be inhibitory factors inherent in this method of weaning.

Abrupt separation is a common weaning practice, but it does not have good evidence to support the practice. The process involves drafting the calves off and moving them as far as possible from their dams. The stock become difficult to move, and both cows and calves take longer to settle down, resulting in increased stress levels and often damage to fencing.

Gradual separation is essentially like yard weaning, except it is done in the paddock on pasture. Calves and their dams share a fence line, and slowly wean themselves. It requires good fencing, and does not have the inherent benefits of future feedlot weight gain benefit and familiarisation with the yard complex that yard weaning does. Additionally calves and cows walk the fence a lot, resulting in weight loss and increased incidence of pinkeye and respiratory disease from the dust

## **Disease management**

Disease management is extremely important for future weight gains and welfare. A protocol very similar to the following would be advised;

- Soak down the yards before weaning. This will keep the dust down, and help to reduce the incidence of pink eye and respiratory disease.
- Apply insecticide backline (eg. Arrest). Flies are a vector for pink eye.
- Drench the weaners. A faecal egg count can be done prior and post to weaning to assess worm burden and drench resistance.
- Vaccinate with 5in1 clostridial injection (And again 4-6 weeks after).
- Keep husbandry (additional stress) to a minimum.

## **Nutritional management**

The younger the calves are at weaning, the higher the energy and protein levels of the feed need to be. Commercial rations, or if you have the capabilities for home mixed rations, should be utilised for early weaned cattle, as hay and silage will almost never be of high enough nutrition for calves this young.

Start at 300 grams, and slowly introduce grain in their diet by 100 gram per day increments. Some possible diets are listed below.

Source: DPI of Victoria

A bicarbonate buffer and additional calcium should also be added to mixed rations.

A sound idea would be to divide calves into management groups by their weights post weaning so as their feeding regimen can be tailored more specifically.

**For more information about Weaning Beef Cattle feel free to contact one of the vets at HVC on (02) 60362374.**