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Illustration by Corey Lewis.

Weaning calves – art or science?

When weaning, making sure calves are as comfortable as possible can be the ticket to more pounds on their frames and dollars in your pocket.

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It's that time of year when spring-calving cows need to have their calves weaned. By this time, the cow's milk production has declined enough that the calf is eating a significant amount of forage alongside the cow to meet its energy demands for growth. If a producer provides supplemental creep feed, they have likely seen their creep feeders empty more and more quickly as we move into the fall season and calves increase their consumption. It is hard to have blanket recommendations for producers across the U.S., as environments and production practices vary so much between regions and even producers within regions. Nonetheless, there are some basic principles and practices that will give your calves the best chance at navigating the weaning process.

Define the goals, design the process

Weaning calves is something that can be done abruptly or gradually. Most producers will do it abruptly by removing the calves from the cows and providing feed separately to each. The use of nose flaps has been a recent practice some producers have employed that allows the calves to stay with the cow but discourages nursing, as it causes discomfort for the cow. Utilizing nose flaps has some challenges, as the calves have to be run through the chute to apply them, they can be lost in the pasture and sometimes can cause great sores in the nose of the calf.

Whether done abruptly or gradually, producers should define what their goals are beyond just separating cow and calf in the weaning process. The most commonly evaluated metrics in the cattle industry include growth factors such as weaning weight, average daily gain (ADG) or feed efficiency. These are certainly important, but health metrics are probably more important things to target during the weaning process. Having a plan to provide freshly weaned calves with timely, palatable feed that encourages them to come to the bunk is a must. With stress levels high, the ability of the calf's immune system to respond will be largely negated if the calf is in a negative energy state.

Prepare the hotel

It has been said often to think of the weaning pen as a hotel. When you check into a hotel, what are your expectations? Clean sheets, temperature control and fresh amenities probably are at the top of the list. Your weaning pen should mimic this. It should be a clean pen with some fresh bedding. The water tank should be clean and of sufficient size to accommodate the number of calves in the pen. The feedbunks should be easy to get to. Ideally, we want the weaning pen to be wider than it is long. We want to minimize the distance from the feedbunk to the back of the pen. The widespread use of movable free-standing panels in the past decade has made it relatively easy to accomplish this on a temporary basis. When the calves are bigger or the weaning process is complete, they can easily be removed.

Customer service is also a service that needs to be available if needed at a hotel. In the case of weaning, you are the calves' customer service agent. Walking the pen and observing the cattle for illness will be key to getting ahead of any problems. Acclimating the cattle to the pen upon arrival can be a very high-return practice. Cattle like to find the corner of the pen that has the least amount of pressure, and that is usually the far corner away from the feedbunks. More timid or flighty cattle may not want to leave that corner to eat or drink. Spending a few minutes applying pressure on cattle in those corners, releasing pressure and getting them comfortable with the entire pen the first couple of days can make cattle at ease moving about the pen.

Cattle and an economy – energy makes both run

There are a lot of nutritional factors a nutritionist needs to consider when formulating diets. Fiber, protein, minerals and vitamins all need to be considered. Water and energy, though, are what the focus should be on. Water is simple. There needs to be abundant clean water that ultimately drives feed intake in the rumen. Getting the correct amount of energy can be more problematic. Weaned calves, in particular ones that are naïve to grains and hauled to a new location, are prone to not eating much the first couple days. Some producers will try to increase the energy of the diet to counter this, but it can at the same time compound the problem by making a ration even more unfamiliar to the calves.

Long-stemmed roughage can be a producer's best friend the first day or two to bring calves to the bunk. This will be a familiar feed type and it is a great, safe way to stimulate appetite and rumination. From there, the ration will largely be dictated by which feedstuffs are available to the farm or feedlot. Corn is probably the most widely available feedstuff and is a great source of energy but needs to be delivered in controlled amounts. Corn byproducts such as distillers grain and gluten are great feed options that bring highly available energy and protein to the diet. Wet distillers and wet gluten are great feedstuffs for conditioning a ration and increasing palatability while decreasing the ability of calves to sort it.

Tips and tricks

The use of lick tubs can be a beneficial practice in a couple of different ways. First, they can be placed in the back of the pen where more timid cattle are prone to lounge. Just being close to the cattle will encourage the consumption of some nutrients. Secondly, the act of licking will generate sodium bicarbonate in the animal's system and help stimulate appetite.

Spreading the roughage in front of the bunk on the ground will also help bring cattle closer to the bunk initially. With flighty cattle or lighter-weight cattle that are more timid, this can be a useful practice to help get them more comfortable with the front of the pen. The addi-

tion of music or a radio that projects sound over the area can also help provide background noise that helps mask sudden noises that might frighten cattle or cause a “jailbreak,” particularly at night.

Everybody is strapped for time. Producers need to leverage their assets to develop a game plan beforehand. Balancing rations is not rocket science, but consulting a nutritionist to make sure everything is in the right proportions will pay dividends. Having a developed relationship with a vet is of the utmost importance with the new antibiotic regulations that have been implemented over the last several years. Nutritionists and veterinarians will also be keen to what you should be on the lookout for locally and be quick to troubleshoot any problems that arise.