

How Weaning Management can get Calves off to the Right Start for Stockering

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Weaning can be a very stressful event in the life of a calf. It is not uncommon for calves to be weaned abruptly, separating the calf from the cow and immediately moving the calf to some new environment away from its dam. There are many potential sources of stress during the time surrounding weaning that may include any of the following: loading and unloading from trailers, transport, crowding, restraint, commingling with unfamiliar animals, withholding of feed and water. Stress during weaning makes calves more susceptible to respiratory infections such as bovine respiratory disease, causing a high level of mortality and morbidity in feeder calves. It has been estimated that the beef industry may lose over one billion dollars every year from this disease.

There are more gradual ways of weaning that can potentially reduce the stress experienced by the calf. Less stress should help keep the calf healthier prior to entering a backgrounding program. The attachment between a cow and its calf is strong, as it is with most mothers and their babies. So breaking that attachment suddenly can be quite unsettling for the calf. “Low-stress” weaning methods work by breaking down the weaning process into two steps. The first step is preventing the calf from suckling while still allowing it some contact with the cow and then after a period of time (usually anywhere from 4 to 10 days) the calf and cow are separated completely. Two such methods are fence-line weaning and nose-clip weaning. In fence-line weaning, calves are physically separated from their dams and placed in an adjacent paddock so that they can still be comforted by seeing and hearing the cow but they cannot suckle. With nose-clip weaning an antisuckling nose-clip is placed on the calf. This clip has small points that irritate the cow when the calf attempts to suckle, causing the cow to walk away and refusing to nurse. Because the nose-clip hangs in front of the calves nose it also acts to some extent as a physical barrier to prevent suckling, but does not interfere with the calf being able to graze. Nose-clip weaning allows the calf to maintain physical contact with its mother while getting accustomed to not being nursed.

Implementation of these low-stress weaning methods depends on what resources are available. Fence-line weaned calves will spend a lot of time in the first few days pacing along the fence looking for a way back to their dam. Because of this, fences need to be in good shape to prevent calves from crossing back through. In order to nose-clip wean, the nose-clips must be purchased (around \$3 each) and the calves need to be brought to a working facility twice for nose-clips to be put in and later to be removed (although this may be combined with other management activities and not be extra work). There are a few circumstances to note on the use of nose-clips. Because most of the nose-clips out on the market are made of a molded plastic there will often be a

coarse ridge along the portion that will be on the inside of the calf's nose. Smoothing down this ridge should help reduce the degree of nasal irritation. Also, consider what type of waterer and mineral feeders will be used by the calf. If the calf has to push down a ball in the waterer or lift up a lid on a mineral feeder the calf might stop drinking or eating mineral because its nose has become irritated or sore from the nose-clip. Also, it is possible for the nose-clip to be pulled off altogether by getting hung up on something in the pasture and the weaning process will no longer be "low-stress" when the calf is separated from the cow.

Besides the most immediate concern of a newly weaned calf becoming sick, the question of how does weaning method impact animal performance during the backgrounding period is currently being evaluated in a series of studies at Mississippi State University. Past research has tended to favor fence-line weaning over nose-clip weaning or showed no differences at all in backgrounding performance. However, there are several different types of nose-clips available for purchase. Therefore in addition to comparing fence-line weaning to nose-clip weaning, the Mississippi State study will compare different types of nose-clips including a "one-size fits all" variety along with nose-clips that are adjustable enabling them to fit both larger and smaller noses. For more information on stocker cattle management, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.