

Cattle Business in Mississippi – May 2018
“Beef Production Strategies” article
Weaning Calves

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This time of year, my favorite chore to do on the farm is wean fall-born calves. I like to take weaning weights, calculate adjusted 205 day weights, and compute ratios for in herd use. I always look forward to seeing what sire groups worked best. Then, there are some years (like this one) when I am just looking forward to getting the calves off the cow. After the winter that wouldn't end, my cows ready for a well-deserved break. As we plan for the upcoming weaning, there are several things that should be in place for a smooth break between the cow and her calf.

There are a few questions we need to ask ourselves before going through the weaning process with our calves. First and foremost, we must ask if our calves' immune systems are up to the challenge. There has been quite a bit of research conducted that shows weaning is one of the most stressful times in a calf's life. We know that stress makes calves more vulnerable to sickness, so anything we can incorporate to reduce stress or boost immunity will often work to our favor. One practice I am a huge proponent for is pre-weaning vaccines. By vaccinating calves 2-4 weeks prior to weaning for viruses that initiate Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD), we can give their immune system a boost. When selecting a BRD vaccine, make sure that it is labeled for calves nursing cows. At this time, I also like to castrate any male calves that I might have missed and de-horn.

Next, we need to ask ourselves if our facilities are up to the challenge. Some research has indicated that fence-line weaning is less stressful for calves. Some the early findings of my research project has indicated that during the fence-line weaning process, the average cow will spend some time at the fence line for 5 days. As you would expect on the first day, they'll spend quite a bit of time looking across from their calves, but as each day goes, the time spent at the fence decreases. The fence line we use has an off-set electric fence on both the cow side and calf side for extra security. If fence-line weaning is not an option, calves can be weaned in a corral, barn or other type of enclosure. Make sure their boundaries are secure. If questionable, construct a temporary electric fence inside the perimeter. Whatever method you choose should have access to water, a feed source, and shade. Having plenty of bunkspace to hold a high quality feed will help calves make the transition from their dam's milk. Additionally, I like to set out a roll of familiar hay for the calves to munch on.

After the calves and cows are separated, we can ask the most important question; what should we do now? First I am going to collect weaning data. Record keeping to me is one of the most important parts to weaning. It is just as important to know which cows weaned the poorer doing calves as it is to know what cows did their self. Collect weaning weights if possible. Mississippi BCIA has an extremely handy worksheet on calculating 205 day adjusted weaning

weights. The Commercial Cattle Adjusted Weaning Weight Calculator can be found at extension.msstate.edu/beef. Finally, I need to determine how long I am planning to keep the calves. If I am marketing at the stockyard, I will want to consider how long it will take them to quit bawling and re-gain any weight they might have lost during the weaning process. If forage is plentiful, feed costs are low, and I have a place for them –I like to background them for 45-60 days. For this decision it is important to know your breakeven costs and cost of gain.

While I look forward to weaning, I am glad it only comes twice a year (spring and fall). In my opinion, this is one of the best arguments for a defined calving season. As the swine folks say, all in – all out. As we gear up for weaning, any strides we can make in decreasing stress on the calves will be positive. Beef up your facilities (pun intended) prior to weaning. Lastly collect some weaning data on the calves, this will help in selection of replacements and in determining which cows to cull. Lastly, know your costs and study the markets to make the right decision on when to sell. Happy spring everyone!

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For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit extension.msstate.edu/beef.