



Extension Extra

ExEx 2031
July 2002
Animal &
Range
Sciences

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES / SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / USDA

Early Weaning Beef Calves

*Kent Tjardes, Cody Wright, and Don Boggs
Animal and Range Sciences Department, SDSU*

Weaning calves earlier than the normal 6-7 months of age is a management practice that should be considered when pastures are short or quality is poor. Calves have been weaned successfully at less than 2 months of age. However, normal rumen function is not developed until approximately 120 days of age. Research has demonstrated that calves older than 90 days have satisfactory gains without being put on milk replacers. Calves can be placed in a drylot on a medium energy diet (NE_g ≥ 0.45 Mcal/lb), on a higher quality pasture, or a pasture with supplemental creep feed.

Advantages:

- Lowers the nutrient requirement for the cow to more closely match forage quality and quantity
- Increases the carrying capacity of the pasture by reducing the cow's intake
- Gives cows a better chance to regain body condition before winter
- May improve reproductive performance of cows (both this year and next)
- Improves efficiency of gain for early weaned calf
- Improves quality grade of early weaned calf

Disadvantages:

- Requires more labor
- Requires facilities and feed for early weaned calves
- Increases susceptibility of early weaned calves to stress and subsequent health problems
- Increases possibility that early weaned calves may have lower carcass weights or become fatter at lighter weights

Considerations:

- Complete castration, dehorning, and branding at least 10-14 days prior to weaning.
- Vaccinate calves against clostridial and viral infections prior to weaning.
- Decide the destination for calves—such as selling calves straight off the cow, backgrounding, or retained ownership.
- Consider adapting calves to creep feed prior to early weaning to aid in starting calves on feed.
- If calves are placed on a self feeder and a high quality forage, use an intake limiter in the self feeder to prevent over consumption of grain.

More detailed information on early weaning beef calves can be found at <http://ars.sdstate.edu/extbeef/>
or contact your local Extension educator or Extension beef specialists.

This publication can be accessed electronically from the SDSU College of Agriculture & Biological Sciences
publications page at <http://agbiopubs.sdstate.edu/articles/ExEx2031.pdf>