



Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan Inc.

## Early Weaning of Calves

*One of the options when drought severely reduces pasture quantity or quality is weaning the calves earlier than normal. There is little point in leaving a calf on its mother when her milk production has dropped off because of lack of feed. Calf gains are very poor yet as long as the cow is trying to produce milk, the nursing calf will drag her down nutritionally. The result is a light calf and a thin cow going into winter, which will need extra feed to reduce cold stress and restore body fat reserves. Thin cows suffer from the cold more than cows in good condition.*

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### Benefits of Early Weaning

Feeding a thin cow over winter can easily cost an extra \$100 or more compared to feeding a cow going into winter with a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 3.0. If the cows can gain body condition before winter, weaning early may save feed in the winter, as well as save next year's breeding season and weaning weights. It will also save both the percentage calf crop and weaning weights for two years following. Early weaning of first calf heifers, especially good milkers, will allow them to gain condition before winter which is especially critical to their fertility the following year.

Weaning calves at 100 days of age reduces daily Digestible Energy (DE) and Crude Protein (CP) requirements of high producing nursing cows by over 40%. Weaning at 150 days reduces DE and CP requirements of the same cow by about 33%. This allows the cow to adapt to reduced feed availability, stretches existing pasture, and except in extreme feed shortages, allows the cow to maintain or improve body condition before winter.

If you are already buying feed for cows on pasture, then weaning as soon as possible is even more important. Feeding the weaned calf and cow separately rather than feeding the cow to produce milk to feed the calf saves 15 to 20% in feed quantity and quality.

Where forage quality is very poor in late summer and early fall, early weaning should be a routine management practice.

### Managing the Early Weaned Calf

As any dairy operator knows, calves can be weaned at very young ages, however, the younger the calf the higher the feed quality and management requirements. If the health, nutrition and physical needs of calves are met, subsequent performance will be every bit as good as if the calf had stayed with its mother on good pasture.

Follow regular weaning management routines, which should include the following:

- Castration, dehorning, branding, etc., should be done well before weaning.
- Vaccination and parasite treatment programs recommended by your veterinarian should be carried out at least three weeks before weaning.
- Start calves on the weaning ration as creep feed three weeks prior to weaning.

- Wean onto long grass hay, then gradually introduce chopped alfalfa over two weeks. Silage is not recommended as taste and bulk discourages adequate intake.
- Keep clean water and a complete vitamin-mineral mix (loose, not block) available free choice.
- Keep careful watch for sick calves. Early recognition and treatment is critical.

Health problems with early-weaned calves are less if the calves are kept on the home ranch. In drought conditions, respiratory disease caused by dust is a real problem with weaned calves. A small well sheltered pen or pasture will reduce fence travel. Limiting the number of calves in a pen to 20 to 25 for the first two weeks allows young timid calves opportunity to eat and drink.

## Feeding the Early Weaned Calf

Early weaned calves need high quality, easily digested growing rations, which they can consume at 2.5 to 3.0% of body weight in dry feed per day. The ration should produce gains comparable to those on the cow and not fatten them too early.

A 300 lb calf will gain about 2.0 lbs per day, eating about 8 or 9 lbs of a 50:50 hay: concentrated ration with about 15% Crude Protein (CP) and 70% Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) (1.4 Mcal Digestible Energy (DE)/lb). Larger framed fast growing calves, which normally gain 2.5 lbs per day or better, will need a correspondingly higher energy-higher protein ration. (The cost per tonne of calf feed may seem high, but cost of gain is cheaper than buying feed for the cow to feed the calf or having a thin cow going into winter).

Requirements of calves for high quality ration, about 75% TDN (1.5 Mcal DE/lb):

- Wean at 100 days or earlier – 18% CP dairy calf ration plus high quality chopped alfalfa hay.
- Wean at 150 days – 14% CP growing ration plus high quality alfalfa-grass hay.

Calves are more easily weaned at 150 days as rumen function develops around 120 days of age.

**Note:** Do NOT use feeds with Urea on early-weaned calves, as they do not metabolize it very well; better to use supplements with natural protein sources such as soybean meal or canola meal.

For more information:

- Western Forage Beef Group (Foragebeef.ca) – [www.foragebeef.ca](http://www.foragebeef.ca)
- Western Beef Development Centre – [www.wbdc.sk.ca](http://www.wbdc.sk.ca)
- Prairie Feed Resource Centre – [www.feedresources.usask.ca](http://www.feedresources.usask.ca)
- SAFRR – [www.agr.gov.sk.ca/Livestock.asp?firstPick=Livestock](http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/Livestock.asp?firstPick=Livestock)
- AAFRD – [www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/app21/rtw/index.jsp](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/app21/rtw/index.jsp)
- MAFRI – [www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/index.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/index.html)



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