

News Column

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## WEANING TIME

It's possible that I'm just trying to justify my screw ups, but I've often said that I learn the most powerful lessons when I make mistakes. And, the really expensive mistakes – whether it be lost livestock, a crop disaster, or even a wrecked vehicle – are the ones that really hit home.

This all makes sense until you think a little deeper, and realize there might be expensive mistakes that you make over and over, costing thousands of dollars, without ever recognizing the mistake. Then, have you really learned anything?

Probably not.

At the McClure farm, the repeated mistake, the one that cost us money year after year, was weaning spring calves too late in the fall. Our pasture season ran from May 1 to November 1, so we weaned in November. Sometimes we weaned in December.

There are obvious reasons why we weaned when we brought the cows home from pasture. The first reason is because we only had to handle the herd once if we waited until it was time to bring cows home for the winter. Setting up corrals, and gathering and sorting cattle took time.

Reason (excuse) number two is that we were really busy in the fall. We got fields ready to plant in early September, planted wheat in late September and early October, then harvested milo through October. We were too busy to worry about making money on the cowherd.

Excuse number three is that we really had no place to put the cows until we harvested the

fall crops. When the cows came home they were dumped directly onto milo stalks.

Wait a minute though. Excuse number three isn't a good reason to not bring the calves home early. The calves were coming home to a dry lot, so there was always a place for them.

And, excuse number one – that it was too much work – is really just an excuse! The extra work to set up corrals and sort cattle would have easily been paid for by increased calf gains and improved cow pregnancy rates the next spring.

So, you might ask, “If you never did it right, how do you know you were doing it wrong?” That's the deal. I remember very well the one time we got it right. That year we pulled the calves earlier (mid-September) from one 25-cow pasture because we wanted to wean some bull calves to send to the Beloit bull test. The results were eye-opening.

What I remember – and this isn't research data, but I'll bet I can find the numbers to back me up – is that group of calves weighed 40 to 50 pounds more than their contemporaries by the time we sold them in February. And,....that group of 25 cows put on weight before winter and were still easy to pick out when they went to grass the following spring.

Research trials indicate that cows handled like the group whose calves were weaned earlier will have better conception rates than their thinner counterparts. With the calves removed, cows can gain considerable weight on stalks before the tough winter weather sets in.

If calves are going to be weaned in a dry lot, whether it is now or a month from now, consider the following tips to make the weaning process go smoother.

- Castrate, dehorn, brand, and vaccinate at least three weeks before weaning.
- If possible, allow calves and cows access to the weaning pen before weaning, then move the cows and not the calves.
- Where practical, feed both cows and calves a small amount of the weaning ration in

bunks prior to weaning.

- Provide good grass hay as a part of the ration for the first 10 days or so after weaning. Since calves are used to eating grass, that's what they need to start off. Provide ½ to 1% of body weight of grass hay and ½ to 1% of body weight of a weaning ration or pellet the first day. That's 2.5 to 5 pounds of each for a 500 pound calf. Put the hay on top the first couple of days.
- Place feed bunks and water tanks along perimeter fences where calves will run into them while walking the fence. Calves first need to find feed before they will start eating it.
- Monitor bunks and calves closely. The first two weeks are critical. Watch to be sure every calf is eating, and treat sick calves as needed.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to [gmcclore@ksu.edu](mailto:gmcclore@ksu.edu).

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