

Beef MOOving Minutes

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Early Weaning Your Beef Calves

According to the United States Drought Monitor, approximately 35% of Montana is currently experiencing drought conditions in the North Central and North Western portions of the state. As the dry conditions persist, some ranchers may consider early weaning their calves. Early weaning calves can relieve grazing pressure on pastures, which will become increasingly important if rain doesn't occur in the near future.

Early weaning can be used as a management tool when forage is limiting during drought. Early weaning can also impact cow and calf performance as well as pasture productivity and health. Early weaning may also require additional management, nutrition, health, and facilities.

Advantages to Early Weaning

1. *Improved cow body condition.* Lactation increases the nutrient requirements of the cow, and cows can lose body condition due to the increased nutrient demand. During a drought, forage quality and quantity diminishes rapidly. Early weaning calves eliminates the nutrient demand for lactation, which allows cows to maintain or improve body condition prior to fall and winter.
2. *Improved forage availability.* By eliminating the nutritional demand of lactation in the cows, cows will consume less dry matter. Early weaning in to a drylot also removes the forage demand by the calf and reduces the pressure of grazing on drought stricken pastures.
3. *Improved calf performance.* As forage quality and quantity are reduced during drought, adequate forage may not be available for both the cow and calf. By early weaning in to a drylot, the calves may be fed a high quality diet, with calves reaching their growth potential. Calves may also be weaned early to a better quality pasture, which will better enable calves to reach their growth potential.

Disadvantages to Early Weaning

1. *Increased management needs.* Greater attention to management, health, nutrition, and facilities is needed when early weaning. Improved facilities may be required, especially when weaning in to a drylot. Calf health is one of the most important considerations during weaning, both traditional and early, to maintain optimal growth. Due to the increased management demands, additional labor may be needed. Calves can be early weaned on pasture with portable feed bunks, but this does not relieve any grazing pressure. Calves require a high-quality diet and the available pasture may be poor quality, so additional supplement costs may be required.
2. *Increased cash costs.* By weaning calves early, additional costs may be accrued. Calves weaned in to a drylot require high quality feeds to reach their growth potential. Facility improvements to hold smaller calves may also be needed when early weaning.

Early weaning is a management tool that can be used during a drought when forage becomes limiting. If considering early weaning, determine the advantages and disadvantages associated to determine if this would be the best option available.

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