



COW SENSE CHRONICLE

AUGUST 2016

EARLY WEANING AS A DROUGHT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

I've been hearing from folks experiencing drought and fires throughout the state. Other regions are in good shape, but some are ready for winter to come to the rescue! This month, I'll give a brief overview of early weaning as one drought management tool for ranchers.

The majority of spring-born beef calves are weaned at 6 to 7 months of age, typically in October or November. This timeframe will vary based on calving season, location, and marketing scheme. As dry conditions result in limited forage availability, producers may consider early weaning to ease some of the demand. By the time a calf is 6 to 7 months old, he or she consumes about half of the amount of forage that a mature cow consumes.

Weaning calves removes the lactation demand for nutrients. Cow requirements and intake will both decrease after weaning. A rule of thumb I use in my beef cattle management class is that for every day calves are weaned earlier than normal, 0.6 grazing days worth of forage are saved. This incorporates both the decrease in calf consumption of forage and the lower intake of a non-lactating cow. This thumb rule was developed with a 1300-lb cow weaning a 600-lb calf at 7 months of age. If forage is of adequate quantity and quality, we expect cow body condition to improve post-weaning, which can pay dividends for the next breeding season. Weaning earlier gives the cow more time during mid-gestation when her requirements are the lowest to put on weight going in to winter and next year's calving season.

Early weaning does come with some challenges. What are you going to do with the early weaned calves? In a drought situation, you might not have forage available to wean them on pasture. Do you have harvested feedstuffs you can feed to them? Can you send them to your buyer early? Will they stay in pens built for larger calves? Are you prepared to deal with calf health issues that may arise? Do you have the resources to have them backgrounded on-ranch or elsewhere?

Questions for Rachel?
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There are a couple of schools of thought when it comes to early weaning. “Traditional” early weaning might be August or September instead of October or November for many spring calving herds, like what I’ve described on the previous page. Research has shown improvements in cow condition that could make a positive difference in reproductive performance next year. If, however, we are in a bad enough drought situation that we feel we need to make a positive difference in reproductive performance THIS year, calves need to be weaned before the breeding season. Cows will increase body condition and breed up well in this system. The disadvantage is that you now have a bunch of 80-day-old calves to manage, and that’s not for the faint-hearted.

Don’t forget the upcoming Veterinary Feed Directive short courses around the state. We’d love to see you and visit about the implications the new rule has for livestock producers, so RSVP to the appropriate local county Extension office listed below. All meetings start at 1 pm.

VFD SHORT COURSE SCHEDULE SUMMER 2016

DATE	CITY	LOCATION	CONTACT NUMBER
AUGUST 3	MILES CITY	FORT KEOGH	874-3370
AUGUST 4	BILLINGS	COUNTY COURTHOUSE	256-2828
AUGUST 9	GLASGOW	COTTONWOOD INN	228-6241
AUGUST 10	HAVRE	MSU NARC	231-5150
AUGUST 11	LEWISTOWN	EAGLES	535-3919
AUGUST 16	SIDNEY	EXTENSION OFFICE	433-1206
AUGUST 24	BUTTE	PUBLIC LIBRARY	723-0217
AUGUST 25	MISSOULA	EXTENSION OFFICE	258-4200
SEPTEMBER 12	GREAT FALLS	TBD	454-6980
SEPTEMBER 21	DILLON	UM-WESTERN	683-3785