

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

By: Lindsay Shorter

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Agriculture Extension Agent

“Weaning Strategies”

As fall approaches, many of us are looking at weaning our spring-born calves. Weaning is considered one of the most stressful periods in the calf’s life. The various changes that come along with weaning can result in tremendous challenges to the calf’s short-term and long-term health, gain performance, and economic viability. Calves that are sick or become sick during the first 30 days at the feedlot typically have lower daily gains, increased costs of gain and reduced carcass quality and tenderness (Fulton et al., 2002; Gardner et al., 1999; McNeill, 1999).

As producers, we all want this to be as smooth as a transition as possible. K-State beef cattle specialist recently discussed helpful weaning strategies to consider.

Step 1: Re-evaluate what has been previously done.

What has been done in the past? What has worked well from a labor and facilities standpoint? What has not worked well, and we need to avoid this year?

Step 2: Check facilities and pastures beforehand.

K-State beef cattle specialist, Bob Weaber, reminds producers to check fence lines and prepare pastures by mowing down weeds that might interfere with hotwire fences, or cause eye irritation in calves. Have your facilities ready before bringing calves in.

Step 3: Water, Water, Water

Pay special attention to water access for newly-weaned calves. Water is the most important nutrient, so make sure your calves can easily reach it. For those who provide water to the cattle through a frost-free cattle waterer with a lid and ball, consider removing the lid so the calves can see and smell the water easier as they walk by.

Step 4: Consider Low stress weaning options

Allowing cows and calves to be separated by a fence, so they can still see and smell each other allows for a lower stress weaning option. Once the cow and calf have made it through that transition, then producers can begin altering the calf’s diet.

Other weaning strategies such as total separation, and two-stage weaning are options some producers consider depending on their restraints of time, facilities and resources. Total separation tends to be a highest stress option. Two-Stage weaning, usually involves a preventative device being put on the calf to prevent sucking on the cow. The obvious down side of two-stage weaning is cost and labor. Calves must

be run through a chute 2 times during the weaning phase (1st time for insertion and the 2nd time for removal). However, calves can usually be processed during one of those times.

Ultimately, producers need to match their weaning plan to what works best for the operation. With respect to both time, facilities and resources. Management alternatives to alleviate stress and ensure that the calf's immune system is prepared to cope with the challenges associated with weaning will benefit both calf welfare and productivity.

For more information regarding Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development, or K-State Research and Extension call the office at 620-583-7455, email me, Lindsay Shorter, at lindsayshorter@ksu.edu, or stop by the office which is located inside the courthouse. Be sure to follow K-State Research and Extension- Greenwood County on Facebook for the most up-to-date information on Extension education programs and the Greenwood County 4-H program.