

Weight Gain in the First 28 Days after Weaning on Five Commercial Cow-Calf Farms

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Introduction

The last three years have seen large increases in the costs to keep a cow calf pair for a year. Annual costs have risen from \$325-\$400 per cow calf pair per year to \$475-\$550 per cow calf pair (SPA data) over the last three years. These increases have occurred at the same time as a downturn in the price per pound of beef calves. Calf prices in 2008 averaged \$0.07 per pound less than 2008 prices and for the last quarter of 2008 averaged \$0.07 less than the 10 year average for calf prices (data from Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services). Reducing expenses alone will not allow producers to maintain profitability in most cases. In order to have revenue exceed the cost of production, cow calf producers must find ways to increase the value of the calves they sell. Preconditioning programs offer one opportunity for producers to increase the net value of the calves they sell. Over a 12 year period calves sold through a preconditioning program brought \$46 per head more than calves marketed the same week that had not been preconditioned (data from Virginia Quality Assured Program). The single biggest hurdle to participating in a preconditioning program is weaning calves. Weaning calves on the farm is no longer a common practice for most small to mid-size producers. These calves are instead commonly marketed directly off the cow. The dogma has become that weaning calves is not worth it because it will take 30 days for calves to put the weight back on that they lose during the weaning process. This project was designed to demonstrate that it is possible to wean calves under a variety of conditions and have those calves gain weight during the 28 days following weaning.

Materials and Methods

Five farms were chosen because of their willingness to participate in the project. Farms were intentionally chosen that had a wide variety of weaning systems. Calves were weighed at weaning and approximately 14 and 28 days later. The number of calves on these farms ranged from 36 calves to 254 calves. Weaning management varied greatly from farm to farm. Farm A

weaned calves in a dry lot and fed hay and three pounds of grain mix. Farm B weaned calves in a dry lot and fed six pounds of grain and free choice hay. Farm C weaned the calves on stockpiled fescue grass and free choice corn gluten feed. Farm D weaned the calves on stockpiled fescue and fed the calves five pounds of corn silage on a dry matter basis and five pounds of corn distillers grain. Farm E weaned the calves in total confinement and fed a TMR consisting of corn silage, haylage, and wet brewer's grain. Farms C and D had their feed consumption and costs recorded to calculate cost of gain.

Results

On all five farms calves gained weight during the 28 day period after weaning. The average daily weight gains for the five farms (A-E respectively) were 1.7, 2.1, 2.4, 2.8, and 3.3 lb per head per day (0.79, 0.97, 1.08, 1.25, 1.51 kg per head per day). The cost of gain for farm C was \$0.09 per lb (\$0.20 per kg). The cost of gain for farm D was \$0.10 per lb (\$0.23 per kg).

Significance

Thirty years ago weaning was a routine procedure done on most cow calf operations. Cheap corn and high calf prices have led to the direct marketing of calves without on farm weaning of the calf crop. Most of the data on weaning calves has come from university settings. While these settings provide excellent research data farmers often feel that they cannot duplicate the conditions present on these farms. The purpose of this project was to have data to demonstrate to producers that calves could be successfully weaned on farms that were very similar to their farms and that calves weaned correctly would gain weight during the first 28 days of the weaning period. The data collected in this project shows it is possible to wean calves under a variety of conditions and have those calves gain weight during the weaning period. By choosing a method to wean calves that fits their farm facilities, feeding, and labor options, producers can use weaning to increase the value of their calves.