

## **Managing Early-Weaned Calves**

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Early weaning is not a common management practice with the exception of drought years. Realizing that a lactating cow's body condition may suffer when forage supply is limited, cattle producers may choose to wean the calf crop at an early age. Weaning the calf at an early age reduces the cow's nutritional requirement, making it easier to maintain or accumulate body condition. Once the decision to wean early has been determined, the next question asked is, "What do I do with the calf?" Two basic options for managing the weaned calf are (1) sell the calf immediately and (2) background the calf until normal weaning or longer.

Selling the calf immediately eliminates risk. Unfortunately, despite bringing a higher price per pound, the value of the early weaned calf is usually less than its value if weaned at a normal age. In addition, selling the calf will eliminate the additional labor required for managing the calf until marketing later.

Backgrounding the calf can provide additional value from the weight gained from early weaning until normal weaning time. During this period, care must be taken to vaccinate, control internal and external parasites, and provide a diet that will result in positive weight gains.

Most likely, early weaned calves will be managed in a drylot setting if drought conditions are prevalent. The diet of the early weaned calf will be dependent upon the age at weaning. Very young cattle (less than 3 months of age) have not developed a functional rumen. The diet of these cattle should focus on supplying a high level of concentrate and low level of fiber. This management is common in the dairy industry where calves are commonly weaned from bottles by one month of age. Older calves (4 months of age) will have a rumen that is capable of handling a higher percentage of forage; however, it is important that forages included in the calf's diet are very good quality. The maturity of harvested forages results in slower weight gains and poorer feed conversions.

It is recommended that rations be formulated for the desired performance while considering cost of ingredients and physiological capabilities of the calf. Healthy calves fed a moderately low fiber diet will have a very good feed conversion. As long as the cost to put on a pound of gain is less than the value of added weight gain, these calves can be retained and developed to a heavier weight. With a hay shortage, feed by-products such as corn gluten feed and soybean hulls will become a more economical source of nutrients; therefore, producers should consider using more grains and by-products and less forage in developing the calves.

For information on managing early-weaned calves, contact your local county Extension office.