

# Being Lazier In Your Cow-Calf Operation Might Pay Off In The Long Run

**COLUMBIA, MO.**

**W**eaning fall calves early the next spring might leave you doing more work and earning less money, according to a University of Missouri Extension forage specialist.

Research is beginning to show that leaving calves with their mothers longer pays off, said Rob Kallenbach.

“One thing we’ve noticed is when the calves are weaned in April, we’re weaning and selling the calf right in front of the high-level forage production in spring,” Kallenbach said. “We’re looking at ways for farmers to simply capture some of this value and not hurt the cows so they can rebreed well for the next year.”

Data collected at the MU Forage Systems Research Center in Linneus, Mo., shows that calves that are not weaned gain 66 percent more weight daily than those that are just weaned and kept on the farm as stocker calves. They also measure up equally to weaned calves that receive feed along with grazing.

Tests over the past two summers have led researchers Kallenbach, Justin Sexten and Dave Davis to believe that putting calves on a rotational grazing schedule where they are left with their mothers will leave the cows in a healthy state for fall calving. This allows farmers to maximize profit by taking advantage of peak pasture growth.

Calves left with their mothers gain an average of about 2.1 pounds per day from April to June. This equals the average daily weight gain by weaned calves given a feed supplement in a leader-follower system in which calves are rotated through pastureland, followed by the group of mother cows. Weaned calves in a leader-follower system that did not receive feed in addition to pasture gained less, averaging only 1.4 pounds of daily growth.

Kallenbach noted that a few more years of research is needed to ensure that the past two wet summers, with high pasture growth, haven’t skewed the data.

More and more farmers are moving to fall calving. Recent estimates show that about 20 percent of farmers operate fall calving operations.

“Producers like fall calving because the calves are born in September and October, which has reasonably moderate weather. For a lot of the older producers, this means being outside more in the nicer months rather than in February and March,” Kallenbach said. “Another thing is that when a fall-calved calf is marketed, it’s typically ready for sale in the high end of the market cycle, where there aren’t as many calves for sale, so the price is higher.”

This economic gain combined with personal ease has generated more interest in fall calving, making Kallenbach’s research more pressing for farmers looking to adapt their cattle operations.

The method allows Missouri farmers to take advantage of one valuable asset: nearly 12 million acres of hay and grazing land. Fescue – covering approximately 11 million acres in the state – experiences a growth peak in the months of April through June, which provides cheaper feed for cow herds than the winter alternative: hay, silage or feed supplements.

“The downside the cow is calving at the end of the growing season and is supporting a calf through the most difficult and demanding months,” Kallenbach said. “That means you are putting out more hay or grain supplements, which are more expensive than letting the cow work for itself and eat, like in winter calving.”

Kallenbach noted that despite the downside, this management option could result in more money in the long run. For Missouri’s 55,000 cattle producers, that adds up.

“You can gain about \$100 a calf by leaving it with its mother until late June compared to weaning the calf and grazing it alone,” he said. “If you multiply that by a 200-calf herd, that’s a lot of dollars – and \$20,000 bucks to someone every year for darn near free is something to try.”  $\Delta$



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