



Weaning calves earlier is one tactic to coping with limited forage.

U of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture photo by Shane Gadberry

Early Weaning One Tactic To Cope With Poor Forage Conditions

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Early weaning is one tactic cattle producers might consider as their pastures begin to toast, said Shane Gadberry, associate professor-ruminant nutrition for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

"May to June is the time forage production is making the change from predominately cool-season grasses such as fescue and ryegrass to predominately warm-season grasses including bermudgrass, crabgrass, bahiagrass and dallisgrass," he said. "Below average rainfall, however, has slowed the production of these grasses and is beginning to limit the amount of forage available for cows to consume when nutrient requirements are at their greatest for spring calving beef herds."

Having cows in good condition at this time is important because cows have the double duty of producing milk for their calves and being able to breed back to calve again within 365 days, Gadberry said.

Beef calves are commonly weaned at six to seven months of age. Dairy calves are weaned from their dams within a couple of days of birth at the latest.

Researchers that have studied early weaning in beef herds have shown cows benefit from early weaning by being able to gain weight more rapidly and combined with removing the influence of suckling, pregnancy rates and earlier breeding dates have been observed in cows whose calves were weaned as young as 56 days old, he said.

"While there are reproductive benefits to early

weaning beef calves, proper management is essential to success," Gadberry said. "Calves need a diet that is capable of mimicking the nutrients they would have received from milk and the small amount of forage they would begin to consume at that early age."

If fed a high quality diet and managed in a healthy environment, early weaned calves should be able to acquire 1 pound of weight gain for every 4 to six pounds of feed consumed.

"Young calves are very efficient at converting feed into weight gain," he said. "At today's livestock auction market, a pound of beef calf weight gain is worth \$1.58 per pound. If a feed conversion of 5 is used, the cost of feed would have to exceed \$600 a ton before the feed cost of gain would exceed the value of weight gain."

Gadberry said a high-quality diet can be formulated for \$220 to \$320 per ton depending on whether feed is being purchased in bulk and blended on the farm or purchased in small amounts from the local feed store.

Prior to early weaning, cattle producers may want to begin exposing calves to their diet by creep feeding or by supplementing cows in troughs that are low enough to allow calves to eat a little supplement alongside their dams.

"When supplementing cows, extra trough space will be needed for the calves to be able to get to the trough," Gadberry said. "Also, similar ingredients should be used in the cow supplement that would also be used in the early weaned calf's diet to help get the early weaned calf eating quickly during the weaning process."

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