

Research Show Advantages To Fenceline Weaning

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

Weaning time is drawing near for cattle producers who calve in the late-winter season according to Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

"Most will wean when the calves are between six and eight months of age," said Cole.

Cattlemen may simply pull the calves off the cow, load them up and take them to the sale barn with little concern for stress and sickness of the calves.

"An increasing number of folks do wean a month or more before marketing the calves and are aware of sickness problems that could arise due to the stress of weaning," said Cole.

A recommended procedure that has become popular is to fenceline wean. This involves leaving the calves in the pastures they are used to running in while their dams (a dairy animal's mother is known as its dam) are put in a pasture just across the fence.

There is typically less bawling and fence-walking in this system.

A recent weaning demonstration by Michigan State researchers compared the fenceline system to the traditional abrupt, calf and cow separation. They also had a third option in which nose flaps were placed in the calves' nostrils while they remained with their mothers for five days.

A total of 466 steer and heifer calves, ranging in age from 145 to 185 days, were involved.

There were several different observations made by the researchers.

Bawling or vocalizations were much higher in the abrupt-weaned calves while the nose-flap calves bawled very little. Fenceline calves were intermediate in their vocalization.

The number of steps taken daily peaked between 19,000 and 20,000 on the second day after separation for the abrupt calves while the fenceline calves took a little under 8,000 steps. By days three and four all three groups were about the same at 4,000 steps per day.

The percentage of time grazing definitely favored the nose flap group the first day, but by day six, very little difference was noted.

Average daily gain did favor the fenceline calves during the first five days, but when daily gain from day 0 to 28 days was figured, it was a toss up between the three systems.

Treatment for sickness was nearly the same for the three systems.

Gains during finishing and carcass evaluations showed virtually no difference across the three treatments.

"Producers do need to evaluate which weaning method their management system will allow them to do. Minimizing stress does seem to work and if fenceline weaning is an alternative, it should be used. The Michigan State study however indicates the benefits may not be as great after several days as we might think," said Cole.

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