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**No More Excuses!**

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It appears that a large portion of the great state of Ohio is undergoing some degree of abnormally dry weather. Whether your particular location qualifies as "drought-stricken" I suppose depends on your individual perspective or a classification by the U.S. Drought Monitor, <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>. The fact is that beef producers are facing some tough management decisions as a result of the dry conditions.

Probably the highest priority management decision facing beef producers in a drought is feed allocation. In a normal year, pasture growth typically slows this time of year with cool-season grasses. The typical pasture observed around the state shows little to no pasture growth at this time. Cow-calf pairs are rapidly moving towards a deficit situation in terms of feed resources. A typical response would be to offer supplemental hay or grain to cows to help them maintain acceptable production. Feeding hay is a viable option if you have available supplies. Dry conditions throughout the Corn Belt have made feeding corn or other by-products to cows a costlier option.

If you are purchasing grain to supplement your herd, it always seemed to make more sense to feed a growing calf rather than a mature cow to compensate for feed shortages. The typical historic response would be to offer creep feed to calves to reduce some of the nutritional demands of the lactating cow. While creep feeding may make us feel better about how we are treating our cows and calves, research has shown us that creep feeding is an inefficient use of expensive feed resources.

Numerous research trials have shown the feed conversion rate for creep feeding at approximately 8-9 lbs. of creep feed for a pound of gain. The practice of early weaning of calves (any time after 60-75 days of age) offers a more efficient use of our feed dollars. Research trials at Ohio State's Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center consistently show feed conversion rates of 4-5 lbs. of feed for a pound of gain associated with higher energy diets fed to early weaned calves up to 205 days of age (<http://www.joe.org/joe/2007february/rb6.php>). Even with rising feed costs, profitable gains can be associated with early weaning given the current outlook for feeder calf prices. The other major benefit with early weaning is the fact that dry cows will consume at least 20-25% less feed than a lactating cow which can help stretch feed resources.

There are challenges associated with early weaning. Close attention must be paid to the feeding program as the young calves have special nutritional needs and a proper diet must be provided. It is necessary that the producer provides a sound health program. Consult with your local veterinarian to address respiratory, clostridial, and other issues. However, the most common excuse that I hear against early weaning is the need to have an extra pasture or drylot to wean cattle with good fence, easy access to water, and feed bunks. Now is not the time for excuses!

Let's look at a typical scenario that could be seen in Ohio. For this example, we will look at a 20 head cow herd feeding \$400/ton creep feed. We will compare early weaning at 100 days of age compared to the typical 200 days of age. Assuming the feed conversion rates listed above, it

would cost \$.80/pound cost of gain for early weaned calves compared to \$1.60/pound cost of gain with creep feeding. Yes, you will feed more total feed per day to the early weaned calf than the normal weaned calf but these pounds will be achieved at a profitable level. Early weaned calves can gain approximately 3 pounds /day during this 100 day period so there is a real opportunity for profit. Don't forget about the 20-25% reduction in nutrient demands of the dry cow which adds up to real savings whether you are in a pasture only situation or you are feeding hay.

This example is a bit of an over-simplification of a complex issue that involves other costs and management considerations. However, I believe it is a big mistake not to consider early weaning if your primary reason is a lack of facilities. Reinvest some of the potential profit from improved calf efficiency and reduced cow maintenance costs to improve your facilities. A 10,000 sq. ft. containment lot would give the average producer in this state a great deal flexibility in regards to management of the calf crop in any year, let alone a difficult year such as 2012. A feeder calf weighing 600 pounds would require approximately 225 sq. ft. of lot space so a 10,000 sq. ft. lot would hold over 40 calves.

Price quotes obtained from an established fence builder indicated that woven wire fencing with barbed wire on the inside of the fence would cost approximately \$3.00 per linear foot. A 10,000 sq. ft. containment lot (100 ft. by 100 ft.) would cost roughly \$1,200 to build. A water source, gates, and feed bunks would be additional expenses. However, these expenses are a longer term investment that can be spread out over several years. The containment lot can certainly be justified to allow the producer to early wean the calf crop when conditions warrant, improve weaning and preconditioning practices in a normal year, used as an occasional calving pen or extra feeding pen, etc.

Any producer must aggressively manage expenses if they want an opportunity to make a profit. I consider an extra containment lot as a necessary cost doing business for the aggressive producer. Producers often leave calves on the cow during a drought, sell calves directly off the cow without a weaning or preconditioning program, or sell calves prematurely when better calf marketing options are on the horizon. If any of these scenarios occur because you don't have a place to put them, it seems like a poor excuse for a missed opportunity to potentially improve the bottom line.