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Should Beef Producers Consider Early Weaning During Drought?

[Amy Radunz](#), UW Beef Extension Specialist

Producers this summer in southern Wisconsin and other drought plagued areas may want to consider early weaning as a strategy for dealing with drought conditions. Beef calves can be successfully weaned starting at 60 days of age and there are several advantages to this strategy in a drought situation.

Advantages to early weaning:

- Dry cows consume significantly less feed than lactating cows and can reduce feed intake from 20-50%, thus extending the grazing period.
- Dry cows will enter the winter in better body condition.
- Result in greater 205 day age weight because weaning weights of calves can be lowered due to reduced milk production and reduced feed available during drought.
- Early weaned calves are very efficient and can convert feed to gain at 3 to 5 lbs of feed to 1 lb of gain.
- Early weaning from 30-60 days of age prior to breeding can improve pregnancy rates, but can be more challenging to manage calves at this age.

Producers should also be aware that early weaning will increase management and cash costs to a beef operation.

Challenges to early weaning:

- Need to have an extra pasture or drylot to wean cattle with good fence, easy access to water, and feed bunks and requires more intensive management.
- Need to have grain, co-products, or high quality forage to maintain calf gain thus increasing feed costs
- Consult a veterinarian for recommended vaccination protocols, but producers should consider vaccination for clostridial and respiratory diseases. Calves could experience coccidia and worms, thus may want to consider a feed additive to address coccidia and consider deworming the calves.

The success of early weaning is to pay close attention to feeding management and providing the proper diet.

Feeding recommendations for calves:

- Start 300-400 lb calves on 4 lbs/head of concentrate/supplement mix. And consider starting with whole shelled corn or distillers grains as the concentrate. And supplement mix should contain vitamins and minerals.
- Commercial protein supplements with 16-18% protein should be fed for the first 14 days and then when intake of 2% body weight is reached can feed a protein supplement with 14-16% protein
- Give calves hay at 1.0-1.5 lbs/hd/day, then top dress concentrate mix. Can use soy hulls or alfalfa pellets if hay is unavailable.

- Do not increase concentrate by more than 1.0 lb/hd/day and do not feed more than 2 lbs/hd/d of hay.
- From 100-205 days of age, calves will consume approximately 2.0-2.5% of body weight on dry matter basis. Once calves are 205 days of age, they can be placed on a traditional high-grain finishing diet.
- If you don't want to feed grain, consider feeding a processed high quality forage, so calves can consume enough to maintain gain during this period.
- [Nutritional strategies for receiving and feeding early-weaned calves](#) - Ohio State University Extension
- [Early weaning beef calves](#) - NDSU Extension

In order to successfully early wean, you may want to evaluate your weaning methods to reduce stress. Some low stress weaning methods include fenceline weaning on pasture or using anti-suckling devices. In addition, recommend producers find a time when heat stress will be minimized for the first few days when calves are weaned.

Low-stress weaning strategies resources:

- [Fenceline Weaning](#)
- [Using Anti-Suckling Devices to Wean Beef Calves](#)
- [Weaning on Pasture for Low-stress Beef Production](#)