

A Weaning Strategy

By Marty Morgan, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Agent, Cooke County

Minimizing stress on yourself, your cows, your calves and reducing shrink.

Well its Weaning Time! Or as I like to say "It's Pay Day!!!" Weaning your calves is right around the corner for most of us unless you have early weaned for different reasons such as drought, falling prices, heifer's calves, to name a few. October and November are usually the time we set our sights on this task that some dread, many even hate, but I have always had a zip in my step because I know pay day is almost here and I can make sure that me and banker have a good Christmas. The secret to easier weaning is minimizing stress any way you can and reduce shrink at the same time. A lot of folks don't even consider shrink but it can more than pay for a good 30-45 day weaning program and put money in your pocket. You didn't work all year to give away 20-40 lbs of your calf. If you get \$1.50/lb for your calves and they shrink 40 pounds then you are leaving \$60 a head on the table, or \$30 at 20 lbs of shrink. That's a lot of money just pooped on the ground, 100 head of calves equals \$3000-6000, gone!!! In reality you will not eliminate all of the shrink, but from personal experience of over 25 years of paying attention to weaning, shrink and crunching the numbers, you can easily make yourself \$20-60 per head just by eliminating most of the stress and shrink at weaning time. I had a set of scales at the ranch so I used them to my advantage to do a little research on the subjects, because I didn't want to leave any money on the table and someone else profit from my hard work. If you don't have a set of scales on the ranch that's ok, but it's a good investment if you have enough cattle to justify one. And you can prove this to yourself over and over, patting yourself on the back every time. Just like you can prove to yourself that a good mineral program will add 30-40 pounds to your calves and growth implants another 20-30 pounds. Do you realize these four things--minimizing stress and shrink at weaning, mineral and implants can gain you from 70-100 extra pounds of calf each and every year. Your 5-6 weight calves could be 6-7 weight calves! That means more dollars in your pocket!

So what can we do to minimize stress at weaning?

I am going to discuss methods I have used in handling large groups of 200-600 plus cows and hopefully close to that many calves on them, but the same philosophy can apply to smaller groups just as easy.

Some ranchers that have a small number of cows let mother nature wean their calves to the point where they have yearling calves still suckling until it's almost time for the cow to calve again. I don't recommend that for a number of reasons but this method simply doesn't work on larger cow herds, or at least not for very long, economically speaking. I have purchased many truckloads of cows over the years and the very first thing I do when I receive them besides give them all shots, deworm and ID, is to sort off and cull all of the high headed, get in your britches, crazy cows. Ain't nobody got time for that! And I have just eliminated some stress at weaning time for both me and the calves! You know they always throw in a few crazy's, it never fails!

One thing I think helps is to get your calves gentle by moseying around through them from the time they are born until weaning time, yes even large groups of 200-600 head will get used to you or your horses if

you are out there with them every day or several days a week. They even begin to follow you around before weaning time almost to the point of being a nuisance, but its money in the pocket I say. Use a rotational grazing system even if it's only semi-intensive and that way all the cattle are used to following the feed truck through a gate and know they are moving to a fresh pasture. They move so easy it's a one man job most days. And it will help when you move them in to the trap the day before you are ready to wean and process. More stress will be eliminated.

Another pointer is get them used to eating cubes or some kind of feed about 30 days or more before weaning. A lot of the time we have to feed cubes starting in August and sometimes through to weaning because of dry weather, but even if you don't need to, go ahead and start this 30 days out from weaning whether your using a sack or the hopper on your truck, and then use the same method once the calves are weaned in the trap. They get used to it and most will put their head down and eat. Also they learn how to eat out of troughs by eating out of mineral feeders their entire life, another reason for mineral.

Another pointer is the day of weaning, or preferably the day before if you have a trap big enough to hold them (not the weaning trap), is to toll them in with the feed truck and then ease around and shut the gate. You will need to have ample water available in the trap, so traps that are big enough for earthen stock tanks is great, but if not you can put several water troughs in strategic positions to get the job done. It's imperative they have plenty of water. The next day you can easily get them into the pens without chousing them around very much at all. A little more stress eliminated.

The next thing is to have good ranch hands and hire some cowboys that are calm, cool and collected. There is nothing worse than a hot head on foot or horseback trying to sort or work cattle. They are your cattle so be firm when it comes to making sure everyone is doing their part and handle them easy but efficiently. If you background your calves a good easy entry into the alleyway and chute is the key when processing the calves. After processing the calves turn them in to the weaning trap and palpate the cows. Use this method at branding when you work both the cows and the calves. It's fun to rope and drag but it makes the calves afraid of the horses and wild, so I quit doing that years ago. You are in the modern day cattle business after all, and you can get modern with a decent set of pens and a calf table to work the calves. It's much faster and easier on them and you have eliminated more stress.

When it comes to weaning calves, the traditional or dry-lot method is the most common weaning method used by producers with large groups of cattle. Calves are separated from their mothers and moved to dry-lots where the calves are isolated from any contact with their mothers. If you use the truck weaning method and immediately haul them to the sale barn then you're going to take a beating on shrink and have a calf that doesn't look his best going through the ring. If you hold them to background they walk the fence and ball more than a week, most times more. I have had them loose up to 40 plus pounds that first week, then, it takes them 2-3 weeks to put what they just lost back on, if you're lucky. I started looking for a better way to do it. In my opinion fence-line weaning is the best method and can be low stress for cows and calves if done right. Fence-line weaning is a method that has proven effective for many operations, so use it where possible. This allows cows and calves to see and sense each other, but has a fenced division, so they're not allowed to nurse. Calves walk less, ball less, and continue to gain more weight than calves that are more abruptly separated from their

mothers. Using the fence-line method my weaned calves shrunk a fourth less and were able to make up what they lost twice as fast as dry-lot weaned calves. While the dry-lot calves were still losing weight in the second week, the fence-lined weaned calves were gaining.

Yes it takes a good stout fence to keep the calves from crawling through or the cows from jumping over, but it's worth your time and money in the long run. If you don't have a large enough weaning trap then use a small trap or dry lot but use the fence-line method, it works great. The key to this is to have enough room for the calves to spread out and providing them the best nutrition you can. Use your best hay in the small trap or dry-lot and unroll several bales. This gives calves plenty of room to eat and it will eliminate a lot of dust, or keep them out of the mud, either way a winner. Yes you will have some waste but that's ok if it will help keep my calves from getting sick and provide plenty of good nutrition at the same time. Of course use that sack or hopper on your truck to supplement them and get the calves gaining weight as soon as possible. A sick calf equals extra stress, high medicine bills and a decline in weight, so try to eliminate it by keeping them on a good diet, footing and dust free. Once the calves have the ball out and are eating, move the cows out of sight and away from the calves. The difference the fence-line method makes is this, you can get the ball out of calves in about 3-4 days instead of 7-10 days or longer, get them eating faster and keep them healthy. I was a hard head for a long time but I finally tried it and I wouldn't do it any other way. It just works the best, plain and simple. It is the most effective way for low stress weaning and calves will start eating almost right away.

Setting up working facilities, weaning traps, holding pens etc.. is a lot of work and it will take you a few years to accomplish this and get the bugs worked out, but once you have it set up you will wish you had done it years ago. The disadvantage of fence-line weaning is the extra infrastructure necessary. You'll need a very secure and strong fence and the extra space to keep cows and calves separated if using a small trap or dry-lot. If you've been weaning one way for years and it's a stressful and dreaded event for your operation, it might be time to consider a new way.

Whatever weaning method you choose for your operation, do what you can to minimize stress and reduce shrink. Doing so will help prevent lost revenue, illness, dehydration, depression and bawling. Making the weaning process easier for cows and calves will absolutely make things easier on you.

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