

News Column

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WEANING SUCCESS

Having personally always been a good eater and an easy keeper, I have a tendency to think others should function in the same manner, whether we are talking about children, or a newly weaned set of calves. Experience, of course, has proven me wrong with both species.

My own kids didn't cause me too much grief, except for one of the girls who got really thin her freshman year of high school. I bought M&Ms, Oreos, and potato chips that were to be hidden in her room as own personal supply. And, I thought my plan was working marvelously until I learned her mother was sneaking into her room for a snack now and then, and that's why I kept having to buy more Oreos..

To try to get the thin daughter to eat breakfast, I made breakfast burritos she could warm in the microwave and eat on the way to school. I even warmed them up and handed them to her on the way out the door.

The burrito idea was brilliant. They were really good (I thought) and she took one with her nearly every day.

Then, one day, I cleaned out her car and found burritos everywhere – in the passenger seat, on the floor of the back seat, under the seat, in the crack between the seats, and under the pile of crap in the back seat. Seven uneaten burritos.

She eventually learned to eat, but not before teaching me that you sometimes have to do more than just put food (feed) in front of them, and walk away. Sometimes you have to hang

around and watch them eat.

Watching a set of newly weaned calves eat can be time well spent too. Before doing that though, cattlemen should take steps to make it more likely they actually will eat, instead of just standing at the fence bawling for their mothers.

The first step to take is to locate feed bunks perpendicular along the fence where calves tend to congregate while looking for their mothers. Before they will eat, they first have to find the feed. So, you want the feed where they will accidentally run into it.

Since calves are used to eating grass and aren't used to eating the weaning ration you want them to eat, they need to be enticed to the bunk with high quality grass hay. Ideally, the grass hay will be chopped and placed on top of the weaning ration for about three days to attract calves to the bunk.

On day four, the order the feed is placed in the bunk should be flipped, putting the hay on the bottom and the weaning ration on top. Start calves off on day one with 0.5% of the body weight of weaning ration and 0.5% of body weight of grass hay. That's about all they will eat to start off.

For a 500 pound calf, that's just 1/4 pound of weaning ration and 1/4 pound of hay. That doesn't sound like much, but you will increase the weaning ration by 0.2% per day while keeping the amount of hay constant, reaching a total of about 2.2% of body weight by day seven.

Calves should be eating 2.2% to 2.5% of their body weight in feed, on a dry matter basis, within two weeks of weaning.

It is important to get calves started eating dry feed as soon as possible after weaning. For that to happen, they need to first find the feed, then decide to eat it. To make the transition easier for them, we start with something they know – good grass hay – then gradually work them up to

eating more and more of the higher quality feed they need.

And don't forget – spend some time watching your calves it. It not only helps identify the problem calves, but it's kind of therapeutic for the cattleman too.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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