

News Column
by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

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Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

EARLY WEANING

When I was a kid growing up if we made it to church before they passed the offering plate, we were on time. If we arrived during the opening hymn, then we were early. The word early means different things to different people.

If you normally wean March-born calves the first of November when cattle come off grass, then September would be considered early weaning for you. A calf born the first of March is already 198 days old on September 15. That's not really early for the calf, but it may be early for you.

I have long been a proponent of getting calves weaned off cows earlier in the fall instead of letting them continue to challenge their mothers' ability to feed both herself and a calf on grass that is declining in nutrient value. Those calves aren't gaining much weight while still nursing their mothers late in the fall, and the mother cows are usually losing weight at that time of year if they are nursing a calf.

In good years – like this year in Riley County – unweaned calves might still be gaining weight on grass. That doesn't mean they shouldn't be weaned though. I am mostly concerned about the reproductive performance of cows the following year when I encourage earlier weaning.

Spring calving cows that have their calves weaned off in September, or earlier, can gain a significant amount of weight through the remainder of the fall and early winter. The reason that

matters is because cows that go into the winter in better condition will still be in better condition in the spring when breeding season rolls around.

Cows in good condition at the start of the breeding season will breed back earlier, resulting in heavier calves weaned the following fall. In addition to cows breeding earlier in the season, you will also have a higher percentage that actually breed. You will have heavier calves and you will also have more calves.

I might not climb up on this soap box so often if I hadn't done my own mini research trial several years ago. It wouldn't pass the test for research because it wasn't replicated, and the results were just from one year, but the results were dramatic.

Cows at the McClure farm were spread out in pastures anywhere from two miles to 10 miles from home, with each pasture holding 25 to 30 cows. It usually took a week to gather the cattle from all pastures, so instead of catching each bunch twice we waited until the first of November to wean calves and haul everything home.

One year in the late 1980's I wanted to enter a set of Gelbvieh bulls in the Beloit Bull Test. Bulls were to be delivered to the test site in mid-October, meaning we needed to wean those bulls in early September instead of November. It was a radical change for us, but we decided to give it a shot.

The set of bulls we wanted were all in the same pasture, so we just weaned all 25 calves from that group and brought them home, leaving their mothers on grass another two months. When November rolled around we weaned calves from the other pastures and threw them all together with the group already at home, to background through the winter.

Come spring time two things were obvious. First, the cows that had been weaned early were easy to pick out in the herd. They had gained weight in the fall and stayed in better

condition after calving and until going to grass again in the spring.

The other thing we noticed was that the early weaned calves were about 50 pounds heavier than the rest. That's not where I think we made our money though. I believe the money is made by having cows in better condition, resulting in higher conception rates and more calves born early the next spring.

Try it just once and you really won't need me to convince you — I'm sure you'll convince yourself that earlier weaning is the way to go.

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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