Choose the weaning protocol that best matches your management style and facilities. This choice can make a big difference in the stress levels of your cows, your calves and you.

The majority of Pennsylvania beef producers calve in the spring. With the fall comes time to wean those spring calves and ready them for the feedlot or as retained replacement bulls and heifers. Regardless of where they will ultimately end, good weaning practices will help them get the start they need.

Good weaning management attempts to keep the stress levels as low as possible in both the cow and calf. Before weaning is ever attempted it is a good practice to have the calves vaccinated against the usual respiratory diseases that can affect them. It is best to vaccinate the calves at least once two weeks before weaning and if time and facilities allows to even booster them before you wean. This goes for castration also. If your time and your facilities do not allow you to easily work cows and calves through the chute a second time, calves can receive booster shots after they are totally weaned, are eating on their own and are settled in their new environment. By doing this we are not adding additional stress to them during the weaning process. If you can accomplish this before weaning then the only thing that needs to occur on weaning day is the separation of the cows from the calves.

There are many different ways that producers can handle calves at weaning time. The most stressful method is to separate the cows and calves and then transport the calves to a totally new lot. By doing this you are adding the stress of a new environment that is totally strange to the calves. However many producers find that the bawling will stop sooner if they cannot hear or see the cows. Research has shown that stress levels increase rapidly with this method.

Fence line weaning has become very popular and research has shown that the calf stress level is greatly reduced by this method. Calves can hear and see the cow but cannot nurse. Both cows and calves soon adapt to the situation and wean with much less stress. Producers must make sure that they have adequate fencing between the cows and calves. There is nothing worse than a calf that gets back to the cow after two or three days of weaning and the process has to start over again.

Nose clips or weaning rings also work well. A few days before weaning the cows and calves are brought in, the calves are run through the chute and the plastic weaning ring is placed in their nose. This causes very little discomfort but prevents the calf from nursing the cow while alongside of her. At this stage the cow’s milk production is very low and the calf is receiving very little nutrition from the cow. This method allows the calf to stop nursing while still maintaining contact with the cow. About five to seven days after the rings are in place, the cows and calves can be separated, the rings removed, and the amount of bawling from the cows and calves is usually very minimal. Stress levels are very low and the calves adjust well. If calves learn to work the ring so they can nurse the cow you will still have the bawling and stress levels as if you had never used the ring. This rarely occurs but when it does you will know who learned to manage the ring.

Natural weaning is not a very good option. Cows will eventually wean the older calves but usually at the expense of the new calf the cow is carrying. The older calves will often nurse up until the new calf is born and sometimes after that eliminating much of the colostrum that would have been available for the new calf. The cow also never dries up and never gets a chance to recondition herself for the new calf coming along. Many will become thin and will not rebreed.
During the weaning process you need to watch calves for any signs of sickness. Often times the weather plays a major factor. Hot days and cold nights can often affect calves. If they were vaccinated properly that will help but every so often you will see calves that just can’t avoid getting sick. Early detection of those calves and treatment will help prevent them from going into pneumonia which can cause permanent damage to lungs and future damage to their ability to gain.

Weaned calves should have fresh hay and water in front of them from day one. If calves had been on creep offering that creep feed to them right away will keep them eating. If they did not have creep then offering feed in small amounts will help them begin to eat. You can increase feed as time goes on but don’t over feed! Make sure there is adequate protein in the feed as protein is necessary for calves to grow and the rumen to function. They have just come off the cow’s milk and, in many cases, plenty of grass, which are both high in protein. Limiting protein will definitely set the calves back. Calves never exposed to a bunk who are eating very little to start can be started on an 18% crude protein feed. Once the pen is consuming about 10lbs per day they can be lowered to a 16% CP feed.

Most preconditioning programs want calves weaned and on feed for at least 45 days before moving into a feedlot. If you over feed they will go off feed. If you limit protein the calves will take quite a setback. With either situation they won’t be ready to move into that feedlot after 45 days. You will need to hold onto them much longer which adds costs to your cow/calf operation. Don’t ever send calves not totally preconditioned to your buyer if he is purchasing preconditioned calves. He won’t be very happy with the calves and may not become a repeat buyer.

You must look at your own situation to determine what weaning method will work for your farm. These are just some suggestions. For very large herds working cattle through the chutes many times to vaccinate twice and then add weaning rings may not be practical. For some it will be very practical. Those herds who find it impractical may choose to use the fence line method as their best source of weaning. Smaller herds can certainly take part in fence line weaning or weaning rings depending on their facilities and ability to work cattle. The most important part is to make sure that the stress levels on cows and calves is as low as you can possibly make it in your operation. Your stress level needs to be taken into account also!!!!

Authors
Cheryl Ann Fairbairn
Extension Educator