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Early Weaning During Drought Makes Sense

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The drought of

2011 is turning out to be one of the worst on record. Most Texas and Oklahoma producers are looking for things that they can

do to save what little forage they have and to conserve the amount of hay and feed they will need until green-up next spring. Early weaning of the calf crop is a viable option not only from the standpoint of the cow and calf, but for your pastures as well.

Early weaning is the process of removing the calf from the cow sooner than you normally would. If done correctly, you can have a high degree of success, low mortality and morbidity rates, increase the selling weight of your calf, reduce the cow's nutrient requirements and save some forage for later use.

First, let's look at the effects of the early weaning process on our calves. The most important thing that we can do to achieve higher value for calves is to wean, vaccinate and background them. This will ensure a high level of immunity for the calves through the weaning process and forward. It will also add additional pounds to the calves before marketing.

Next, we need to address nutri-

tion, average daily gain and cost of gain. Average daily gain of the calves is the most important component in lowering cost of gain for calves. This means we must provide a high quality diet at an economical price in order to add value to the calves. Using locally available feeds and current prices, I was able to formulate a ration that would allow the calves to gain at 2.5 pounds per day at a cost of 57 cents per pound of additional calf gain (\$231 per ton feed price). To obtain these numbers, I used an average starting weight of 300 pounds and fed the calves until they weighed 550 pounds, which took 100 days. The calves were adjusted over time to a by-product ration that contained 15 percent crude protein (CP) and 73 percent total digestible nutrients (TDN). On average, the calves would eat 11.2 pounds per day once fully adjusted to the ration. In this scenario, we did not have to feed supplemental hay to the calves and were able to increase calf value significantly by adding more weight and backgrounding the calves. Furthermore, this rate of gain is more than the calf would be able to achieve while on the cow during drought.

The benefits do not stop at the calf. The cow will benefit from early weaning by having a reduction in nutrient requirements. An April calving

1,200-pound cow with a 4-month-old calf that is lactating would typically require about 15.4 pounds of TDN and 2.53 pounds of CP. If you were to early wean the calf, thus stopping lactation, you can reduce the cow's requirements to about 11.1 pounds of TDN and 1.5 pounds of CP. This reduction in nutrient requirements translates into more than a 25 percent reduction of feed that is necessary for the cow to maintain body condition. Early weaning will allow the cow to more efficiently use available dormant grass while also allowing her to go into winter in excellent body condition. This will translate into lower feed bills throughout the winter than if you wean later and allow body condition to decrease. The goal is to avoid having cows lose too much weight, which could cause them to either abort this year's calf or fail to breed next spring. The effects of a cow becoming too thin in a drought can be long-lasting if she is open after next year's breeding season.

Finally, early weaning of the calf crop will reduce grazing pressure on pastures. This means that more forage is available for the cows. Cows are your factory and without the factory, you cannot remain in business.

Make sure that cattle are drinking enough water by providing shade ►

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and clean, fresh water during the weaning process. It is best if you can fence-line wean to reduce stress. Wean the calves where they have access to shade. If no natural shade is

available, consider using shade cloth that is temporarily suspended between posts.

Contact a nutritionist for specific help in formulating a ration that best

fits your situation. Noble Foundation livestock consultants can help mitigate the long-term effects of the drought on your ranch. ■