

Ross Mosteller  
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

## Reducing Stress at Weaning

We are entering the time of year when things get busy on most every farm and/or ranch. Combines begin to bring in the harvest and the sounds of bawling cows/calves can fill the air. This can be music to the ears of some, noise to others, but to the cow calf pair it means stress and stress is seldom a good thing. Market signals are pointing to weaning and moving calves quickly this fall. Please consider the following points when weaning, especially if you've never thought about reducing stress and the health effects that go with stress.

The goal at weaning is to minimize stress on the calf as much as possible. All studies indicate that stressors such as feed changes, surgeries, commingling, etc., at the time of weaning increase the incidence of BRD and other health issues. Even in proven, properly implemented preconditioning programs, calves still have two stressors at weaning time - separation from their dams and cessation of nursing. Working on minimizing these stressors should be given thought.

Bovine respiratory disease (BRD) costs the beef industry more than \$1 billion annually in reduced performance, death loss, medicine costs, labor and reduced carcass value. Eliminating all cases of BRD is unrealistic, but no one wants the headaches of dealing with sick cattle. Some producers lack the facilities and/or the feedstuffs to implement a full wean and preconditioning program. Other say there's no choice in their operation but to remove the calves from their dams and sell them without vaccinations, deworming or weaning. This may be true for some, but this likely is only a very small percentage. Following are some weaning options for ranchers to try to help reduce stress at weaning:

\*Wean on Grass. University research has shown that weaning calves onto grass with fence line contact to their dams, can be an excellent option for farms or ranches that lack the weaning facilities or the necessary feedstuffs. The more similar the environment that weaned calves are placed into, compared to what they've experienced with their mothers, the better the weaning process will be.

\*Anti-Nurse Devices. By using an anti-nurse device, stress is minimized because the calf is left on its dam during weaning. Calves fitted with anti-nurse devices one week prior to weaning, generally are eating or lying down chewing their cud 12 hours after weaning, and their dams are out grazing. Compared to "normal" weaning, the stress level difference is dramatic.

\*Limited Nursing Options. Weaning stress can be reduced by allowing calves to nurse once daily for about a week before weaning. This is nearly impossible for a large ranch in range conditions, but many smaller herds could successfully use this method. The calves should be limit-fed a complete ration that allows their rumen to adjust to the diet they'll eat in the feedlot.

While a complete preconditioning program is the "gold standard" for post weaning health, complementary or alternative programs may have a place in your herd. Here are a couple ideas.

\*Earlier Weaning. Calves weaned at about 150 days of age tend to have fewer BRD problems than those weaned at 205 days or later. The nutrition options for these calves include high-quality forage or forage-plus-grain. Another advantage of earlier weaning in spring-calving herds is that the cows tend to go into winter in better condition.

\*Pre-Weaning Vaccination & Ship. Ideally, calves would be held and fed after weaning for a period of time prior to shipment. But if this isn't possible, vaccinating 2-3 weeks pre-weaning still makes sense. This allows the buyer of the bawling calves to booster them rather than expose the calves to the vaccines for the first time. Consultation with your herd health veterinarian on specific products and timing of all vaccines is always recommended.

With the current value of calves, producers need to look at various options to reduce weaning stress and maximize performance, as each pound is worth record value today. Beyond the financial impacts, there is much to be said for the animal well-being side as well. Here's to a low stress weaning season - for calf and producer alike.