

CALVING EASE

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EARLY WEANING PLEASURES AND PERILS

This newsletter is a departure for us. It's a story about Sam's experiences this past year with a change to earlier weaning. We hope you don't get tired of hearing about "I did this..." and "I didn't expect" The "I" in the story is Sam. The story's purpose is to show that even when you think you are prepared to make a change, you still have a lot to learn from direct, hands-on experience.

As our herd expanded I (Sam) had more and more pressure on the one hundred hutches we have along York Road near Pavilion, New York. During August, 1995, we chose to sell about 20 heifer calves because there were no empty hutches. I was weaning calves during their eighth week and moving them to weaning pens (five to a pen) during the ninth week.

If our farm weaned earlier at least some of the numbers crunch on our hutches would be reduced. I read a lot about weaning calves younger than eight weeks. I talked with some folks who were weaning a five and six weeks. I heard a lot of good advice. Wait to wean until she is eating one and one-half pounds of starter. Use a good quality milk replacer. Encourage early consumption of starter grain.

Fools rush in where wise persons never dare go! I figured all that I needed to do was just wean the next batch of calves starting at five weeks rather than eight. One piece of advice that I received was to switch the afternoon milk feeding to water at four weeks - that would encourage the calves to eat more starter grain sooner. Some calves dug into the starter after this change. Others continued to eat less than a pound a day. Mixed results.

With the eight week weaning there was quite a bit of flexibility and a built-in safety margin. Calves were larger, had more fully developed immune systems and more aggressive eating habits than five-week old calves. I don't know why I was so bull-headed about starting to wean all the calves at five weeks. For the first few months I goofed several times by weaning calves at five weeks before they were eating enough grain. This really stressed them out. I lost a couple of calves to chronic pneumonia. Some were ready while others were not. Mixed results.

Keeping track of how much starter grain each calf was eating down to the half pound was a lot harder than I expected in the twenty or so hutches close to five weeks. When weaning at eight weeks the calves were all wolfing down three to five pound a day - who cared about keeping track? Just fill up the buckets. I ended up buying poultry leg bands (3/4" diameter, less than \$.03

each) in two colors. No band on the hutch meant less than one-half pound starter grain daily; blue band meant one pound daily; one red band meant one and one-half pounds daily; and two red bands meant big eater. These bands let me easily spot problem eaters. They also gave me a quick visual check when a group of calves was ready to wean - red bands = ready to wean.

I've always been confident in my ability to spot a sick calf. When weaning at eight weeks now and again the weaning stress will push a calf into pneumonia. Off-feed, runny nose, head down, she doesn't charge at me at feeding time. All these are signals of a sick calf. In my head I knew from research that calves weaned at five weeks have higher stress levels than those weaned at eight weeks; thus, they are at higher risk of getting sick. But knowing in my head and acting on this knowledge are two different things. Finally enough mistakes and sick calves convinced me of the need for more frequent, more careful, more intensive observation. How much less grain than usual did she eat rather than just not eating grain? How much is her water consumption down rather than just not drinking? Is she standing less alert today than yesterday? I heard a cough two rows away - don't just ignore it, go find out who is coughing! Increased attention to details.

To make taking temperatures more tolerable (it really is a chore), I finally purchased a couple of electronic thermometers. Since they cut the time to about one-quarter of that of a mercury column thermometer, I've at least doubled the number of calves I check for fevers. I'm too impatient to wait for the darn thing to "beep" signaling completion. After the tenths digit hasn't changed for a while I figure that's close enough. I won't change diagnosis over one-tenth of a degree. Increased attention to details.

It's easy to say, "Encourage early consumption of starter grain." It's not so easy to accomplish uniformly for five hundred calves a year. I use lots of tricks. They all take a little extra time. After I worked out the leg-band routine, I've been trying to give extra attention to the few calves that I can easily see are lagging behind in starting to eat grain. Some respond, others don't. Grain intake shows up in weight gains - the "early eaters" are averaging close to fifty pounds gain in thirty-five days compared to the "laggard eaters" who are averaging about thirty pounds gain in the same thirty-five days. Increased attention to details.

Benefits of earlier weaning? I expected a substantial decrease in total time needed for calf care. It didn't happen. The savings realized by fewer calves in hutches were partially offset for me by an increase in the number of calves raised and a small increase in time spent per calf in hutches. For example, I watch more closely for calves that drink their milk more slowly than usual rather than just for calves that didn't drink milk at all. Slowness in drinking is a good diagnostic fact but takes a little extra time to observe.

More hutch space should be available with earlier weaning. That benefit was realized. This year I didn't have to bring pre-weaned calves into pens and continue milk feeding for one to two weeks. We didn't have to sell any heifer calves, either.

Perils? I was lulled into a sense of false security by my experiences with eight-week weaning. At first, my level of observation of just-weaned calves was not as intense as it should have been. After many months I gave up the pm-water routine for four-weeks old calves - all it seemed to do is make trouble for the 20 to 40 percent of calves that just didn't seem to be ready to eat more grain. Once I came up with a way to easily monitor grain consumption I became more flexible

in selecting calves to wean. Rather than assuming that a late-bloomer would come along and weaning her in a group, I'm now just holding her back a week or two until she's come along on her own. It adds up to more attention to details and being more flexible in deciding when each calf is ready to wean.

That's the story. No matter how much you think you know, hands-on experience will still teach you a thing or two if you're willing to learn.

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