



Weaning Strategies

by **Troy Smith**

Timing and management are key elements of a successful weaning program.

DENVER, CO (Feb. 1, 2006) — By definition, strategies are plans of action. South Dakota rancher Connee Quinn says many options exist for planning calf weaning strategies. However, Quinn says tradition prevents many cow-calf producers from developing the best course of action for their operations.

During a Cattlemen's College® session, Quinn and Pfizer Animal Health veterinarian Dale Groteleuschen urged ranchers to consider options for two key elements of a successful weaning program: timing and management.

Quinn said timing of weaning may be broken down into three general categories. While weaning traditionally occurs when calves are 6 to 7 months of age, alternatives include early weaning, at 2 to 3 months of age, or less early weaning when calves are 4 to 5 months old. Departure from tradition might be justified when drought or other reasons force reductions in stocking rates.

"But weaning earlier may be most beneficial to producers who retain ownership of their calves (and market fed cattle)," Quinn said. "Weaning calves earlier can allow a dramatic recovery of cow

body condition, but research shows that the calves can achieve increased carcass quality."

Quinn said management should encompass anything producers do to enhance performance. Often, however, some of the things managers do or fail to do will interfere with performance. Too often, she said, weaning practices create nutritional or stress-related interference.

Groteleuschen said the health-related consequences of stress have been the subject of unprecedented discussion in recent years. Stress induces increased secretion of cortisol, which is antagonistic to an animal's immune response.

"Weaning is an artificial event creating health interference and increased susceptibility to disease, with BRD (bovine respiratory disease) presenting the greatest risk," Groteleuschen said.

Along with implementation of a proper vaccination program, he and Quinn urged producers to consider practices to reduce stress. They recommended fenceline weaning as least stressful. If that is not possible, wean calves far enough away from their dams that they cannot see or hear each other.

Groteleuschen also called commingling of calves from different herds, or even from different pastures, a practice that increases stress and exposure to disease pathogens. He and Quinn

also recommended weaning calves at home, for at least 45 days prior to sale or feedlot placement, as part of a successful weaning strategy.



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