

## Early Weaning Can Help Hungry Beef Cows

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As our 2012 drought continues cattle producers are beginning to be concerned about forage supplies and what potential supplements exist in the area. Many locations are running out of grass to graze and the options are lease pasture, sell cows, ship cows to another state, or buy feed. Hay is a hard commodity to get a hold of right now. Many hay producers shipped every extra bale they had to the South, when the drought was so severe down there last year. Now we have a shortage locally and what is available is very expensive. Corn at \$7+ a bushel is not an option many want to utilize either. But instead of increasing inputs, have you considered decreasing cow nutrient demands?

Early weaning is an option that some producers may want to look at. Typically, lactation is considered to be the largest nutrient requirement for the beef cow. The heavy milking beef cow may utilize as much as half of her daily nutrient intake to produce milk. Even light milk producers can use one-third of her daily nutrient intake for milk production. This means that if we can wean the calf and dry up the cow's lactation cycle early, we can lower the needs of the cow and effectively make her more efficient during the drought. In times of limited forage, early weaning research has shown that removing the calf improves cow body condition, calf performance, cow conception rates, and forage availability for the cow. There are a couple of disadvantages that have to be weighed against the positives. First, there will be added costs related to feeding the weaned calves for a longer period. Secondly, by weaning the calves early there is an increased need for health monitoring, nutrition inputs among the calves, and intensive management of the calves.

Whenever I bring up early weaning people want to know how early a calf can be weaned. That answer depends on management and calf behavior. If managed properly with the initial intent of early weaning, a calf can be weaned at three to four weeks of age. Typically, if it is a decision based on an emergency, like drought, I would suggest no sooner than two months of age. The rumen of a calf does not function when they are born. The young animal has to begin eating grain or grass on their own before the rumen begins to work. It will take about twenty-one days from the start of eating solid foods until the rumen papillae are developed and working correctly. So the key answer is early weaning can occur about three weeks after the calf is eating grass, hay, or feedstuffs.

I know that there are a lot of questions that a producer may have when they are considering an early weaning strategy. Many more than I can answer in a brief news article. If you want to discuss this more, feel free to call me at the Yuma County Extension office at 970-332-4151.