



Directorate
Communication



Beef cattle: weaning of calves

It is important to decide when and by what means to wean beef calves, because it influences the weaning mass of calves as well as the condition of the cows, and indirectly their conception rates.

Timing

- The major priority in beef production is to produce as many calves as possible. The main objective of weaning is therefore to enable a cow to calve every year by allowing her to regain condition after weaning.
- Calves are ideally weaned when they are 7 to 8 months old.
- The right time to wean a calf depends on the condition of the cow and not the age of the calf.
- Calves should be weaned before the condition score of the cow falls below 2,5 if adequate winter feed is available and the cows maintain their condition. The calves should preferably be weaned before the cow's condition score falls below 3,0.
- During years of drought and poor feed supply, calves should be weaned early (about 6 months), to allow the cow to recover before the onset of winter.
- It is important that the cow should recover and that the secretory tissue be restored before the next calf is born.

- **In the eastern parts of the country calves born during spring can be weaned early in May at the age of about 7 to 8 months.**
- **In the more western parts of the country calves can be weaned late in May or early June at the age of about 7 to 8 months as the breeding season tends to be later in these areas.**

Early weaning

- **This practice should only be considered during times of severe drought or feed shortages.**
- **Calves weaned at a relatively young age (less than 5 months) experience severe setbacks.**
- **If the condition of the cow deteriorates considerably before the planned weaning time, the producer must decide whether to**
 - ◆ **wean early and supply concentrate feeding to the calf**
 - ◆ **provide a roughage supplement to the cows that are still suckling their calves.**
- **This decision will depend on the availability and cost of feed. Generally, the feed (mainly concentrates) costs to rear early-weaned calves are relatively high. Therefore, feeding concentrates to calves should only be considered during adverse conditions.**



Methods of weaning

Circumstances on the farm determine the method of weaning. The following methods can be used:

- **Keep the calves in a kraal or well-fenced camp and remove the cows to a distant camp, preferably out of earshot of the calves.**
- **Remove the cows temporarily from a camp and in their absence move the calves to another distant camp. Cows tend to look for their calves in the camp in which they were last seen and this method should prevent the cows from breaking out of the camp.**
- **Exchange calves from two different herds. The calves will then have the company of cows. Some cross-suckling is, however, likely to occur.**
- **Separate the cows and calves by a strong, close-strand wire fence. This method can reduce weaning stress.**
- **Nose plates, commercially available or home-made, can be fitted to calves for 7 to 14 days. These prevent suckling, even if cows and calves remain together throughout the weaning period. When the nose plates are removed the cows and calves are separated, but with relatively little stress.**

General

- **Perform castration, dehorning and branding when calves are 2 to 3 months old, not immediately before weaning. This will ensure that the stress associated with these operations does not add to that of weaning.**
- **A few dry cows can be kept with the weaners to calm them.**
- **Provide sufficient good-quality roughage, water and shade in the weaning camps. To prevent excessive walking and trampling the camps should not be too large.**
- **The weaning process could last 7 to 14 days, depending on the age at which the calves are weaned as well as the breed of the cow.**



For further information contact Directorate Technical Support Services, Potchefstroom



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