How do you decide when to wean your calves each year? Do you wean them once they reach a certain weight? Or, do you wean them the same day every year? Although these may be popular methods of determining when to wean, we propose that there is a wiser, more efficient way to manage your weaning schedule. This week we will introduce this concept by explaining why it is important to be more lenient on dates and weaning weights, and put more emphasis on the consideration of pasture quality and cow body condition when deciding when to wean your calves.

Body condition scoring is a tool that can be used to measure the effectiveness of your herd's nutritional program as the environmental conditions and nutrient requirements of the cows change. This is a valuable resource that also helps predict the reproductive ability of your cows. Studies show that cattle in BCS 5 or 6 have higher reproductive performance than cows in any other BCS classification. Nutritional requirements of a cow vary as a result of her reproductive status; therefore it is important to ensure the cattle are in ideal BCS for the specific stage of production that they are in. Before calving, an adult cow should be in a BCS 5, and heifers should be in a BCS 5 or 6. Often, BCS will decrease if the cows have a calf at side because nursing creates an increase in nutritional requirements. If her requirements for milking are not met, the cow will begin losing condition until: 1) her requirements are met by providing her with more nutrients, or 2) her milking requirements are eliminated altogether by weaning the calf. Because providing more nutrients is often more time consuming and more costly, weaning may be the best option for your operation if you find that your cattle are not maintaining proper body condition under the environmental conditions they are facing.

If the BCS of your cattle is not ideal right now, look at the factors that are affecting them. Do they have big calves at their sides? What is the quality of the forage or feed that they are being provided? Rather than simply look at the calf alone, or a date on the calendar to determine when to wean, analyze the resources that are available to you, and look at the condition of the cattle. It is unrealistic to plan on putting more than ½ of a BCS on a cow during a dry season by grazing normal pasture alone. If possible, calves should be weaned before the cows drop to a BCS 4.5 or lower. This allows for the cows to have ample time to increase in BCS before they calve. If you find yourself in a situation where the BCS of your cattle is lower than ideal, you should take immediate action to correct this so that their reproductive ability is not compromised. This can be achieved by knowing the quality of the hay you have on hand, and by managing your pastures so that your cattle will have the nutrients they need to increase in BCS.

Weaning should involve more than just pulling calves off of the cows at a certain time of year; weaning should be done as a result of taking into account all of the factors that affect the cow. We encourage you to look at the BCS of your cattle and the quality of your pasture when deciding when to wean. An average cattle producer manages his cattle the same way year after year, despite the changing environmental conditions around him. An above average producer manages his cattle in a way that takes into account all factors affecting his operation, and adjusts accordingly. For more on the importance of BCS and how it can be used to make managerial decisions for your operation, visit this link: http://www.iowabeefcenter.org/Beef%20Cattle%20Handbook/Body_Condition_Scoring.pdf

Prices for feeder steers sold through the Superior Livestock Auction on Friday September 11, 2015 are as follows: 465lb- $267.5, 500lb- $255, 640lb- $208, and 750lb- $203.5. The price for October 2015 750lb feeder steers on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange was $194.75 on Friday, September 11, 2015.

Thanks,
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