



Practical Considerations for Fenceline Weaning

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What is Fenceline Weaning?

Fenceline weaning consists of separating cows and calves from one another through the opposite sides of a secure fence. Calves can have nose-to-nose contact or visual/auditory contact with their dams after separation. As long as cows and calves can see and call out to one another, this is considered a lower-stress strategy for separating calves at weaning compared with abrupt separation.

Why Should I Consider Fenceline Weaning for My Operation?

One of the most stressful stages in the life a beef calf is weaning. During the weaning process, calves are separated from their dam and often experience additional unfamiliar events such as vaccinations, castration, dehorning, dietary and environmental changes. This increases the risk of infectious disease and reduces overall performance post-weaning. From an industry standpoint, how the calf crop is managed pre-weaning, at weaning, and post-weaning can affect consumer acceptance, end product quality and economic viability. Stewardship of our land and animal resources is important in producing a

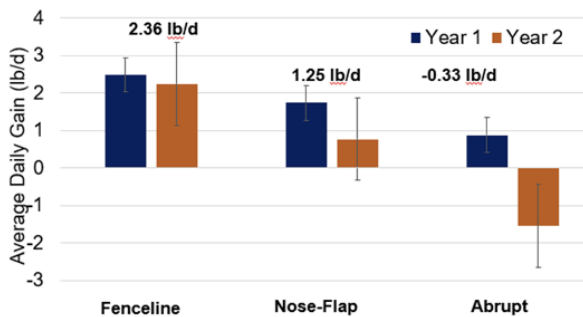
high-quality product for our consumers, and this includes how we manage our resources at our farm.

In Today's Market, Fenceline Weaning Pays!

A recent study using fall-born beef calves from the Black Belt Research and Extension Center, Gulf Coast Research and Extension Center, and EV Smith Research Center was conducted to determine how various weaning methods influence subsequent background and feed yard performance and health. There were 429 steers enrolled in the 2-year study (from two calf crops). Steer calves were weaned by one of three different weaning methods: abruptly weaned, fenceline weaned, or nose-flap weaned. Abruptly weaned calves were transported on the day of weaning to a backgrounding facility (~ 3-hour drive). Fenceline and nose-flap weaned calves stayed at their home farm for a two-week weaning period before being transported to the backgrounding farm. All calves were weighed at weaning, and again 14 days after weaning.

The average initial body weight of these calves as they entered the weaning period was 646 pounds. Based on the weight gains

above over a two-week time frame, calves that were fenceline weaned gained 20 pounds during this time period (Figure 1). Abruptly weaned calves did not gain weight during the same window. If we use an average market price of \$2.40 per pound for #2 steers in this weight range, this equals an additional \$48/head in value.



Additionally, the effects of weaning stress carried over into our backgrounding phase of this project. We were able to see the effects of weaning method on average daily for another 30 days into the backgrounding period! This further supports that weaning strategy can have a lingering effect on performance of calves as they move into the next sector of the beef industry.

So, How Can I Do It On My Farm?

Think About Fencing Type – There are many fencing material options that can all be effective in keeping the calves separated from their dams. These might include woven wire, multiple strands of single wire, pipe, panel and high-tensile electric. Properly built fences with strategically placed gates will make the weaning process easier on both the cattle and their handlers. If the calves are familiar with the actual pen or pasture and already respect the fence, it reduces the likelihood of escape. Beyond the physical confinement most materials offer, electric fencing can provide a psychological barrier when cattle respect the shock element and do not attempt to go through the fence.

Teach Them the System – Calves should have access to a clean, reliable source of water, and ample quality forage during weaning. If calves are going to be backgrounded and fed supplemental feeds, this is a good time to arrange your weaning pen to train calves to eat from a bunk. Placing troughs perpendicular to the fence or in a visible, frequented area by calves (i.e. near hay, water or shade) may help them learn to eat. Calves will have the natural tendency to walk the fenceline after weaning, which positions them to readily find the water, forage and feed sources when placed in their path. An older animal that is familiar with the system can help to train the calves while giving them a leader to bond with.

Low Stress Handling – Spending some extra time with the calves during weaning can condition them for easier handling and help to gentle the group. Even the simple action of walking around the trough at feeding can desensitize and shrink their flight zone. By using their natural point of balance at the shoulder with appropriate pressure, the group can be slowly moved down a fence to teach them how to drive. The angle of approach will determine the direction of the response and the release of pressure rewards them for doing the right thing. There are great resources on low stress cattle handling available on the Beef Quality Assurance website – scan the QR code at the bottom of this article for more information.

Consider the Entire Weaning Phase – Once the maternal bond has been broken, the calves should bawl less and be more focused on eating. If a small, very secure weaning pen or lot is used for the initial weaning days, moving the calves to a larger pasture with more available grazing is a logical step. It is important to plan the rotation to new pasture and ensure that effective fencing is in place for the pressure of newly weaned calves. A 60-day weaning/backgrounding phase is very common, so account for the quality forage needed for the number of calves during this time.

Summary

As one of the most stressful periods in the life of a beef calf, weaning can have a lasting impact. How producers manage their calves before, during, and after weaning can have a dramatic effect on overall calf performance and economic viability. Any weaning process to help make the separation more gradual and less stressful can potentially improve herd health and performance. Cow-calf producers should understand and examine all options available to determine the best overall weaning strategy for their operation.

For additional information on weaning methods and Beef Quality Assurance, scan the QR codes below:



Beef Quality Assurance



Weaning Methods



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