

Early weaning of spring born calves; an option for North Idaho Cattle Producers

The Situation

Pastures and rangelands in Northern Idaho produce an abundance of forage during the spring and early summer months. Ample rainfall creates an ideal environment for forage growth. The wet season ends in early to mid July which causes the grasses to mature and go into dormancy.

Depending on the year, fall rains provide the necessary moisture to enable grasses and hay fields to regrow. This lush new forage growth is high in quality and meets the nutrient requirements of cows and the calves nursing them. In dry years, very little fall regrowth of forage occurs. In turn, fall forages are very mature and low in nutrients. Cows grazing this poor quality forage can experience weight loss especially if they are nursing calves. The calves will also have slow weight gain when grazing mature, low quality forages.

Cattle producers that spring calve were in need of educational information on the economic advantages and disadvantages of weaning calves in early September versus weaning at the normal time period of mid October to early November.

Our Response

In the winter of 2006, the Idaho/Lewis County Total Beef Program advisory committee determined that a demonstration project on early weaning of spring born calves was needed. The University of Idaho Extension, Idaho County took this advice and designed an early weaning demonstration project that was conducted for two years in 2007 and 2008.

Three cooperating ranches, two in Idaho County and one in Lewis County, were identified and secured for the project. Each year the calves were weighed in early September and then re-weighed approximately



Fall forage quantity and quality will determine if early weaning makes economic sense.

30 days later. Rate of gain data was collected on the calves along with average body condition scores for the cowherd. An economic analysis was conducted on data collected to determine feasibility of early weaning versus leaving the calves on the cows.

Program Outcomes

In 2007, all three herds participated in the test. There had been almost no rainfall since mid-July. The pasture forages were very mature and low in quality, however there was an adequate supply of forage available. The calves gained 1 to 1.5 pounds per day during the 30 day test in September. Cow body condition declined slightly, but there was no significant reduction in body condition scores.

In 2008, two herds were able to participate in the test with Herd C withdrawing from the test due to unforeseen conflicts. The weather was perfect for fall grass growth. Heavy rains fell in late August, cool

wet conditions persisted for two weeks following the rain event. Calf weight gain was very good from 2 to almost 2.5 pounds per day on the calves nursing the cows in September 2008. Cow body condition held steady and some cows actually gained weight. Table 1 summarizes the results from the tests:

Table 1. Calf gain on N. Idaho ranches in 2007-08.

Ranch	2007		ADG	2008		ADG
	Avg. Start Wt.	Avg. End Wt.		Avg. Start Wt.	Avg. End Wt.	
A	471	516	1.42	484	592	2.44
B	485	507	0.99	537	595	2.06
C	447	491	1.57	----	----	----

Results from the test indicated that when there is adequate rainfall to provide grass re-growth in September, weaning calves early does not pay and producers should not adopt this management practice in Northern Idaho. In dry years where there is little to no grass growth in the fall, producers should carefully consider early weaning.

In 2007, feed prices were extremely high. If the calves had been weaned and fed a ration to gain 2 pounds per day, the cost of gain per pound was almost equal to the cost of leaving the calf on the cow, even when the calves only gained 1 pound per day.

Producers should consider feed supply and price, cow body condition, and fall pasture forage availability and quality, when deciding if weaning early will be cost effective.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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61-09jchurch-calves.pub
 11/09