Fence Line Weaning Minimizes Stress On Both Cows And Calves

by Steven D. Lukefahr

KINGSVILLE, Texas: For some years now, I have been practicing fence line weaning. I highly recommend this practice to minimize the stress of weaning on both cows and calves, but to be successful at this you first have to have good fences.

The weaning process was initiated in late September when all cow-calf pairs were moved to one large pasture where they enjoyed grazing in a long-rested pasture. However, another objective was to "top off" plants to stimulate rapid regrowth soon after removing cattle to accumulate more forage biomass before winter.

One morning in early November, all cattle were walked over to another area where pastures (also long-tested) were subdivided by permanent fences made of woven wire (not barbed wire) with access to water tanks. There was also a set of work pens.

All calves were immediately sorted and weighed. Heifers were then returned to their dams in one pasture, while bull calves were weaned by being placed into an adjacent pasture. Their own dams were in the same adjacent pasture with all the heifer-dam pairs.

For the rest of the day, all cattle were busy grazing mostly rich green Coastal Bermuda grass at the base of lush tall stands of Kleberg bluegrass. By days end some bawling could be heard. However, a major advantage of fence line weaning is that the separated pairs can still see and hear one another and even touch noses through the fence. By evening some of the separated pairs were lying down inches apart from one another.

One observation was that cows with heifers spent more time grazing or leisurely chewing their cud, which appeared to keep cows that had their calves weaned more content. Throughout the following day, some intermittent bawling could be heard; however, by the next day the weaning process was over.

It was first the cows as one large cohort to turn their backs away and wander off a good distance in search of more appetizing stands of forage. At any time, cows could be loaded (or walked) and moved to other pastures. Amazingly, the weaned bull calves never lost their good body condition.

During the weaning process, calves had access to lush tall and dense pastures. As previously stated, this stand serves as an effective barrier to internal parasitism. This last fall, because my cattle showed no signs of parasitism - no rough hair coats, emaciation, depression, weak appearance or bloody diarrhea - I did not take fecal samples to my local vet for testing, which I used to do. It was hard to justify this effort when the cattle all looked great.

In earlier years when I did not practice fence line weaning there were outbreaks of Coccidiosis. Calves spent more time bawling and posting fences looking for monos and less time grazing - even when placed in lush stocked pastures. I realized later that this stress resulted from a major microbial shift in the gut (rumen) that was triggered by calves not feeding the desirable bacteria with grass. This resulted in the demise of these bacteria and the proliferation of harmful coccidia that eat bacteria.

Coccidia also destroy the gut wall causing bloody diarrhea, discomfort, poor appetite, sudden weight loss, and even death. It is expensive to treat live-stock for Coccidiosis. It also requires several days of treatment. Long story short - I have solved this problem with fence line weaning.

In my operation, bull calves are sold mostly as breeders soon after weaning. Producers like to develop them further until they are first used for breeding in the summer. For several years, those few bulls that are not of breeding quality are sold as grass fin-
ishers to Buckeye Farms in Harlingen in the Rio Grande Valley. The owners, Ralph O'Quinn and Salema Ortega, sell all-natural, grassfed beef at farmers' markets and restaurants (check out Buckeye Farms on Facebook).

Ralph and Salema are pleased at how well the calves grow and fatten on grass and by their docile nature, which makes them easy to work and transport. Local chefs rave at the flavor of the meat.

When reared as a separate cohort group at Buckeye Farms, these intact bull calves behave themselves. Bull calves compared to steers and heifers grow faster and more efficiently, producing more meat on the rail. Because
of their unique genetics (i.e., no Bos indicus) they fatten well on green grass. A major advantage is no stress of castration and therefore no need of implants containing artificial growth hormone. We do not use antibiotics.

Further, the recent crop of bull calves only consumed grass until several arctic cold fronts blew through the area, which caused most of the taller grasses to become dormant. Calves were fed cottonseed cubes to provide protein. The nitrogen found in protein actually feeds the microbes (cellulolytic bacteria) that efficiently digest fibrous grass for energy.

Another energy consideration is that the tall and dense forage stand serves as a blanket when cattle bed down during arctic cold fronts, effectively reducing energy loss, which minimizes dietary energy requirements. Between this blanket effect and the presence of protected green grass at the base of the dormant forage stands, the need of energy supplements was eliminated this year.

GRAZIERS ARE LIKE MUSICAL CONDUCTORS

To come full circle, it is more about the land. Like a musical conductor who directs an orchestra – producing a rich polyculture of plants that capture solar radiation, deeper soils with high organic matter content, water holding capacity, and a plethora of soil microbes and insects, and higher animal carrying capacity (including wildlife), that is my greatest source of motivation. However, it is also about building good relationships with landowners.

For example, last January one landowner enthusiastically told me about flushing three coverts of quail on a Sunday ride on an ATV through his 125 acre property! It used to be inundated with brush. His land is now a magnet for wildlife. Surely his property value has increased.

He also claims his land is in Ag use to reduce property taxes. In addition, when their out-of-town grandchildren come to visit, they always look forward to taking turns riding my bike, which I think we enjoy more watching. We did not even write a new lease contract this year, although I do strongly recommend this practice.

The challenge remains: What other opportunities exist to work even closer with Nature? To quote Tom Lasater who developed the Beefmaster breed: “Nature is smarter than all of us.” What a profound statement.

Who knows what secrets we can continue to reveal through good management? Oftentimes, Nature’s reward is a further reduction in production costs. What a payback!

In closing, I feel compelled to make a disclaimer that while I recommend several of these sustainable practices, because both the cattle and the environment are in many ways unique; you may not achieve the same level of results. Therefore, my best advice is to begin by making small changes. Later if you are pleased with the results then gradually expand these practices throughout your operation.

Good luck!

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