

Starting Newly Weaned Calves

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One of the greatest challenges cattle producers often experience during weaning is getting newly weaned calves to consume feed in bunk. Unfortunately, successfully addressing this challenge is essential to success. Simply stated, “Cattle that don’t eat don’t perform.” Preparing calves, understanding how much dry feed calves will likely consume and developing a feeding strategy/plan is one of the best ways to ensure success in the weaning pen.

Feeding both cows and calves a small amount of the supplement or weaning ration prior to weaning, in the weaning pen or pasture can be used help acclimate calves to both the feeds and the environment. Additionally, feed intake of weaned calves is often low (1.0 to 1.5% of bodyweight, dry basis) immediately following weaning. Calves also have relatively high nutrient requirements. Thus, the weaning diet must be nutrient dense to meet the nutrient requirements of the calves at the expected intakes previously mentioned. Unfortunately, the dry feeds calves are often most familiar with (typically grass hays) are not necessarily nutrient dense. At the K-State Agriculture Research Center, Hays, KS, a feeding management protocol for weaning calves has been developed that works well for transitioning weaned calves to a total mixed ration. Essentially, high-quality grass hay and the weaning ration are offered each at 0.5% of the calves’ current bodyweight, dry basis, on the day of weaning. The weaning ration is placed in the bottom of the bunk and the hay is placed on top. The amount the weaning ration is steadily increased, while the amount of hay offered remains constant. In addition, on day 4 the hay is placed on the bottom of the bunk. Over a period of 7-10 days the dry intake of the calves is steadily increased and should reach approximately 2.2-2.5% of the calves bodyweight by 10-14 days following weaning.

Thank you to Justin Waggoner, KSU Beef Cattle Specialist, for information on weaning calves. If you have any additional questions, or would like a custom ration made, contact Hunter Nickell, Livestock Production Agent at any of the Southwind Extension District offices or at nickell99@ksu.edu.