



Fenceline weaning provides nose-to-nose contact through a fence between cow and calf. But is it an advantage?

By Burt Rutherford

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There are several good ways to wean your calves. Chasing them down the middle of a highway isn't one of them.

Yet, through no fault of his own, that's the situation that Vance Uden, owner of TC Ranch at Franklin, NE, found himself in four or five years ago. For many years, Uden weaned his calves in pens, the traditional way. But a few years ago, something - bobcats, maybe a cougar - got in with his heifers, and even the stout, well-built pens couldn't hold them back.

"We could walk through those calves and they wouldn't even get up," Uden says. "Yet the day they quit bawling, something went through there and scared the living daylights out of them and that's when we had problems. That's when we

decided to do something different."

The "something different" was to wean in a pasture. Uden had gone to several meetings where fenceline weaning was on the agenda, and he thought he'd give it a try. He did, and he hasn't looked back.

TC Ranch is a 7,000-acre registered Angus operation in south-central Nebraska along the Republican River. Around 1,500 acres produce irrigated crops, including corn, hay and soybeans, with the remainder in upland pastures for the 600-cow herd, 100-150 replacement heifers and their bull crop.

Uden gives a pre-weaning vaccination two to three weeks before splitting the pairs, then weans the heifers across the fence from the cows. Where it's feasible, he puts a creep feeder in the pasture a few days before weaning.

"They get started on that creep," he

says. "We've got a regular fence - it's a pretty decent fence, then we put a hot wire inside of it. Then there's water and grass and the creep." The cows have to travel to the back side of the pasture for water, which Uden thinks helps the weaning process along.

"It's about three days and they're weaned. I've just had no health problems." He says the calves will bawl some, but he doesn't think it's as bad as the bawling with traditional weaning. And unlike traditional weaning, he doesn't stay around to watch the calves.

After a week or 10 days, the calves are gathered, usually given a second round of

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vaccinations, and turned out together in a bigger pasture. "We can turn them into a 30- or 40-acre pasture when we bring them home, and we don't have any problems with them fence crawling. We've had really good luck with it."

The bulk of the TC calves are born in February and March, with a few into April. Uden weans his heifers in early September and backgrounds all his calves. After sorting the bulls and heifers, Uden retains ownership of the bottom 30-35% and feeds them at a commercial feedyard. "We've had very little death loss," he says. "Health in the feedyard has been really good."

Most of the calves Uden feeds are the tail-enders, those calves born late in the calving season. "They're mostly March and April calves that went out (of the feedyard) at the end of May weighing 1,426 lbs. So they did pretty well."

Research results

Uden's on-the-ground experience is similar to much of the research results available on fenceline weaning. The advantage of fenceline weaning, of course, is the reduction in stress. That stress comes from two sources - social separation from the cow, and moving to a new environment where the calves must learn new

feeding and drinking skills, and get familiar with new surroundings and a new social structure. That transition can be one of the most stressful times in a calf's life.

So does weaning calves gradually, across a fence that allows for social contact with the cow, reduce that stress? Some research says it doesn't, but the bulk of available data indicates fenceline weaning offers some advantages.

In data released this summer, beef calves at the New Mexico State University (NMSU) Corona Range Livestock Research Center were fenceline-weaned for seven days. Other than the challenges associated with keeping cows and calves

vocalization, fenceline-weaned calves spent more time eating than calves weaned by other methods (Table 2). Seven days after weaning, all calves were managed together. Fenceline-weaned calves gained at least 50% more weight the first two weeks after weaning than calves weaned by other methods. They also retained that weight advantage through at least 10 weeks post-weaning.

Minimize the stress

Clearly, fenceline weaning isn't practical on all ranches. In situations where it's impossible or impractical, however, minimizing weaning stress is still impor-

tant and allow nose-to-nose contact while preventing nursing.

- If fenceline contact isn't practical, move cows far enough away that they can't hear the calves vocalizing.

- If weaning in a drylot or corral, place feed bunks, hay and water troughs along the fence to minimize perimeter walking and increase encounters with feed and water. If calves are weaned in a pasture, place feed and water along the fenceline where practical to increase the likelihood that calves will find feed and water within the first few hours.

- Placing large water troughs inside the pen and letting water troughs

Nose Knows

separated by marginal fencing, the NMSU fenceline-weaning experience was positive, researchers say. During both 2006 and 2007, calves gained weight and outward signs of stress were minimal (Table 1).

The New Mexico research backs up results from a 2003 University of California study that compared behavior and post-weaning performance of calves that were not weaned, fenceline weaned, abruptly weaned on pasture, abruptly weaned in a drylot without being preconditioned to hay, or abruptly weaned in a drylot after being preconditioned to hay. Calves that were fenceline-weaned were allowed nose-to-nose contact with their dams, but couldn't nurse.

The study indicated that, outside of

tant. Here are some tips:

- Provide calves access to the weaning area (pen, trap or pasture) a few weeks prior to weaning so calves don't undergo the stress of environment change at weaning. At weaning, move the cows to a new location when cows and calves are separated at weaning. Don't move the calves.

- Allow fenceline contact between calf and dam for four to seven days following weaning. Fences should be stur-

overflow slightly may attract calves to the water, and help calves that are accustomed to drinking from live water sources adjust to troughs and the sounds of an activated float.

- Don't add unnecessary stress by castrating, dehorning or branding calves at weaning. These practices should be completed at least three weeks before weaning and preferably prior to three months of age. ■

Table 1. Performance of fenceline-weaned calves

Year	Weaning wt. (lbs.)	7-day post-weaning wt. (lbs.)	Difference
2006	468	484	16
2007	520	524	4

Source: NMSU Corona Range Livestock Research Center

Table 2. Observed calf behavior 3 days post-weaning and cumulative weight gain

Variable	Pasture control		Pasture weaned		Drylot weaned	
	Not weaned	Fenceline contact	No contact	Preconditioned to hay	Not preconditioned to hay	
Eating, %	41 ^a	37 ^a	24 ^{bc}	29 ^b	22 ^c	
Walking, %	9 ^a	10 ^{ab}	28 ^c	10 ^{ab}	15 ^b	
Lying down, %	23 ^a	23 ^a	16 ^b	22 ^a	21 ^{ab}	
Vocalizations/hr.	0.1 ^a	216.7 ^b	434.6 ^c	371.2 ^{bc}	518.2 ^c	
Gain - 2 weeks, lbs.	44 ^a	47 ^a	30 ^b	23 ^b	20 ^b	
Gain - 10 weeks, lbs.	143 ^a	110 ^b	91 ^c	79 ^c	82 ^c	

abc Means with different superscripts within rows differ P<0.05

Source: Price et al., 2003