

Determining the Best Time to Wean

10 a.m. session, Thursday, Dec. 8, 2005

Presenter: Doug Hixon, University of Wyoming.

RAPID CITY, S.D. (Dec. 8, 2005) — When considering the factors that direct management strategies for cow-calf operations, savvy managers always consider the costs associated with various practices. And nothing affects cow maintenance costs more than investment in cow nutrition, or feed.

The time of year a producer chooses to calve certainly influences the kind and cost of feed needed, said Doug Hixon, University of Wyoming animal scientist, at the 2005 Range Beef Cow Symposium. The other primary driver, he said, is time of weaning.

“I think producers have to consider time of weaning as a management tool,” Hixon said. “But they have to remember, anytime you make changes to any part of a production system, you have to evaluate the whole system.”

Hixon said increasing numbers of producers have moved up their weaning dates in recent years. In many drought-ridden parts of cow country, the decision grew out of a need to save grazed forage and hay — both of which were in short supply.

Early weaning to halt milk production and reduce nutrient requirements for cows will reduce the amount of feed cows have to eat to maintain adequate body condition as they go into fall and winter, Hixon said. He cited research suggesting forage consumption is reduced by as much as 27%.

For mature cows, the primary benefit of early weaning stems from feed savings. For first- and second-calvers, early weaning can enhance reproductive performance as well.

Hixon said maintaining body condition is particularly important for 2- and 3-year-old females. They are still growing and have higher nutrient requirements. When these young females nurse a calf well into the fall or early winter, when grazed forages have declined in nutrient value, the females can easily lose body condition. According to Hixon, failure to maintain at least average body condition [body condition score (BCS) 5] increases chances for reproductive failure during the next breeding season.

Especially for 2- and 3-year-olds, Hixon said, early weaning can be an economically feasible management option.



Doug Hixon encouraged producers to use time of weaning as a management tool to reduce feed costs and increase breeding rates.
(PHOTO BY LYNN GORDON)

— by Troy Smith, field editor, Angus Productions Inc.
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