

As we move in to fall, many spring calving herds will begin weaning calves in preparation for their next stage in life be it as replacement females or stocker calves or going straight on feed. To make this transition as smooth and stress free as possible, there are a few things that you should consider when preparing for and weaning calves.

“The first step in planning for weaning is to re-evaluate what has been done in the past, noting what worked best from a labor and facilities standpoint,” said veterinarian Bob Larson, who encourages producers to do a walk-through of the facilities and pens before moving cattle.

K-State Research and Extension beef cattle specialist Bob Weaber said producers need to check fence lines and prepare pastures by mowing down weeds that might interfere with hotwire fences, or cause eye irritation in the calves.

In checking facilities, the experts recommend that producers pay special attention to water access for newly-weaned calves.

“Water is the most important nutrient, so you’ve got to make sure they can reach it,” Larson said.

White said producers may need to add in a water tank to the pen for the calves that have been drinking from ground water sources such as creeks or ponds.

For those who provide water to the cattle through a frost-free cattle waterer with a lid and ball, Weaber suggested removing the lid so the calves can see and smell the water easier as they walk by.

Adjusting how calves receive their nutrition is another important step in the weaning process. Until weaning, most calves receive all of their nutrition from milk and grazed forage. At weaning, the means of delivery for their nutrition usually changes to feed bunks and hay feeders. K-State Extension Specialist Justin Waggoner provides some good tips on helping with this adjustment.

\* Many calves are raised in a grassland environment. Getting them adjusted to a feed bunk is one of the most important things a producer can do in the weaning process. If they do not eat properly there’s an increased risk of disease.

\* Feeding both cows and calves a small amount of a supplement or the weaning ration out of a bunk prior to weaning when the calves are with the cows can be a good way to acclimate them to those feeds. The cows may consume most of the feed, but the calves are up there getting exposed to the bunk.

A study at the K-State Agricultural Research Center at Hays showed that where calves had exposure to a feed bunk, either through a dry lot or pasture method, a higher percentage of them approached and ate from the bunk in the critical first week of weaning than calves that had never been exposed to a feed bunk before, Waggoner said.

“The results tell us previous exposure to the feed bunk really matters,” he added. “This is especially important as newly-weaned calves are brought into a typical feedlot environment or

even a set of pens. Just that adjustment can help in making that successful transition from being at their mother's side to being in a different environment.”

Larson noted that producers should consider a low-stress weaning option.

“To ease the stress on the calves, this option allows for separation from the dams by a fence so that they can see each other across the fence,” he said. Once the cow and calf have made it through that transition, then producers can begin altering the calf's diet, Larson said.

The traditional weaning protocol is to separate calves from the cows by moving them to a new location on or off the farm. “The bottom line is that producers need to match the weaning plan to what works best for their operation in respect to both time and resources,” White said.