

## To wean or not to wean - that is the question?

Advice from Local Land Services Officers  
**Jason Siddell** and **Brett Littler**

With above average temperatures forecast and average rainfall predicted, many cattle producers will still need to be developing management and marketing strategies to deal with water and feed shortages on their properties before they arise.

Early weaning is a tool that should be considered by Northern Tablelands cattle producers to enable them to better manage the fat score of their cows which will help to maintain productivity (i.e. calving and weaning percentages) or ensure cows that are in low body condition can improve prior to sale.

A 500kg lactating cow will require 13kg of good quality hay (8.5 MJ/kg/DM) per day to maintain condition with no paddock feed available.

Once you wean the calf off the cow and feed separately, the amount of feed required for maintenance drops substantially, usually by as much as 30-40% less feed in total (7kg of good quality hay for the 500kg cow and 3.5kg of good quality hay for a 200kg weaner). The health of both the cow and calf will also improve.

Producers who monitor and manage their cows to maintain high fat scores of 2 or more (a minimum of 5mm of fat on the rump) get more calves on the ground and achieve a more condensed calving pattern.

Once cows fall below 5mm of fat on the rump they start to mobilise muscle tissue and fertility drops.



### Strategies for early weaning

#### Older than 6 weeks (80-140kg, 18-20% Crude Protein 13MJ/ME/kg/DM (Energy))

- It is likely to be a simpler and more profitable strategy to sell these calves straight from their mothers, but if you're planning to feed them they are a little bit easier to handle than calves under 6 weeks of age.
- These calves will require high quality pellets and roughage or a grain and protein meal mix with high quality roughage.
- It is advisable to delay marking, branding, and dehorning for a few months.

#### Older than 12 weeks ( $\geq$ 140kg-200kg, 14-16% Crude Protein 12MJ/ME/kg/DM (Energy))

- These calves are far easier to manage and there are more feed options. Feed costs are much lower than with very young calves. You could sell these straight to market or feed grain and roughage.
- Fortified molasses diets fed with roughage can provide good results.
- It is advisable to either have these animals marked, branded and dehorned a few weeks

before weaning or wait a month after weaning to do these jobs.

- Plan how to control parasites and problems like pink eye. Talk to other people who have early weaned and find out what has worked for them. You could also speak to your local district vet.



### Feed Mix suggestion – Calves 2 – 5 months

**100kg: 60kg cracked grain, 18kg protein meal, 19kg roughage (good quality pasture hay or Lucerne hay), 1% Sodium Bicarb, 1.5kg Limestone (Calcium) and 0.5kg salt (sodium).**

Ideally the roughage should be chopped at muzzle width (30–40 mm), which will prevent calves sorting and leaving behind the more fibrous stalks.

Barley straw is traditionally used by many producers however it is lower in quality so a greater proportion of grain/protein meal would need to be fed to offset the reduced protein and energy in the ration.

Transport costs aren't reduced for poorer quality straw, hay and stubbles. Don't waste your money if you are going to transport feed long distances, transport quality. An easy way to work out the true value of the feed you are transporting is to use the NSW DPI Drought Feed Calculator (now a mobile app) to calculate cents/MJ/ME/kg/DM and \$/kg Protein.

It is worth considering dried distillers grain as an affordable protein meal option for early weaning rations.

### Further tips for early weaning:

- Vaccinate calves with 5 in 1, two doses 4-6 weeks apart, with the first shot given ideally 2-3 weeks prior to commencing weaning, otherwise at the point of commencing weaning.
- Avoid mobs of greater than 100 (mobs of 50 or less are preferred).
- Feed animals of similar age and weight - don't mix 100kg calves with 200kg calves.

- Feeding twice daily is preferred (morning and afternoon) – this allows for a more gradual increase in ration, reducing the incidence of gorging and acidosis.
- Start calves onto rations slowly. Start with 0.5kg/head/day and build up 0.25kg every 2–3 days. Remove uneaten pellets or grain ration each day. Calves will reject 'stale' pellets.
- Separate sick animals and shy feeders – it may be best to sell these as they can be an ongoing problem.
- It is best for the site you choose to have all-weather access and avoid feeding areas that are more likely to get boggy after rainfall and provide shade in the yard or paddock.
- Allow enough trough space for the calves - 30cm per head is recommended if you are feeding daily.
- Provide clean water with an adequate flow rate for the number of calves being weaned. Feed the calves away from the watering point so as to minimise feed getting into the water and clean the water regularly. Weaned calves require 10-15L/day with up to 25L/day on hot days.
- Ensure manure burdens are removed from the weaning yard to minimise the potential for house/stable or buffalo flies which can quickly allow pinkeye to spread. Specific fly treatment products which control flies and lice are available.

Early weaning is a very effective tool in reducing feed costs and managing the fat score of cows but once these calves are weaned they either need to have access to good quality pasture/forage or continue to be fed a ration daily if limited or no paddock feed is available.

## Remember you are running a business

Calculate how much your calves are worth prior to weaning, what they are worth after weaning and what weaning/feeding them will cost you. Then decide if you will make money from the exercise or whether you would be better off selling them straight off the cow at current market prices prior to weaning.

### Contacts:

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