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CONSIDER EARLY WEANING

Even in normal years, forage yield and quality decline in mid- to late summer. Nursing cows lose weight if they are not getting enough energy from the pasture. If cows are thin going into the winter, body condition will have to be recovered using expensive stored feed. Poor pasture conditions or milk production also slow calf growth. In drought years, this happens sooner and to a greater extent. Early weaning may help to maintain pasture condition, cow body condition score (BCS), and calf weights.

Reduced grazing pressure: the calves will not be grazing, and the cows will not be lactating. Whether this will be enough to maintain long-term pasture condition and productivity will depend on overall pasture management practices, age of the stand, and other conditions specific to the operation.

Improved cow condition going into winter: A 2005 study compared weaning at 140 or 190 days of age. Over the next 50 days, cows whose calves had been weaned early gained 46 lbs more than cows whose calves were weaned at the traditional time, and maintained their BCS better. The University of Alberta has done similar work, weaning calves as early as 72 days of age. Cows that go into winter in good BCS will need less stored feed to put on fat. As a result, early weaning should help to lower feed costs during the winter feeding period.

Improved gains in early-weaned calves: Calves that are weaned early and fed a high quality diet will grow faster than calves that are nursing cows on poor quality pasture. Another

2005 study compared calves weaned at 202 days to calves at 90 days and put on a 50% grain diet. The calves weaned at 202 days weighed 460 lbs; by this time, the early-weaned calves weighed over 600lbs.

Overall feedlot performance is similar:

Research has shown that if early-weaned calves are managed appropriately, their overall feedlot performance can equal that of traditionally-weaned calves. Early-weaned calves can be managed to get the same overall feedlot average daily gain, carcass weights, yield grades and marbling scores as traditionally-weaned calves. Early-weaned calves can also convert feed more efficiently than traditionally-weaned calves. Placing early-weaned calves on feed before cool, wet fall conditions arrive may help reduce the risk of respiratory disease, but this may be offset if feedlot conditions are excessively dry and dusty.

Marketing considerations: Early-weaned calves may be marketed off the farm or split from cow-calf pairs at the auction. Alternatively, they may be weaned on the farm and put on feed for a few weeks before marketing. In either case, buyers will consider several factors. If the supply of early-weaned calves is high due to

drought, feed costs will also likely be high, and calf prices may be down. Feedlots that are not accustomed to managing early-weaned calves may anticipate additional costs due to respiratory disease or getting calves adjusted to the feedlot diet. If early-weaned calves have been on feed before they are marketed, they will likely not undergo rapid compensatory gain in the feedlot. An added risk is that if early-weaned calves are fed an excessively high-energy diet too early, they may produce excessively fat and/or underweight carcasses.

Consult an expert: Early weaning strategies may be most beneficial for cow-calf producers who retain ownership of their calves to slaughter, or for cow-calf producers who work with a nutritionist or feedlot to ensure that their feed management and implant strategies are appropriate for early-weaned calves. In this case, both parties may benefit economically since the cow herd may require less supplemental winter feeding, pasture conditions may benefit, calf performance is optimized, and calves may suffer less health and nutritional stress when entering the feedlot.

For more information see the links at <http://albertabeef.org/producers/drought/>. ▼

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preparing for the implementation of a refundable check-off, we will ensure that the primary focus of our delegates, directors and staff will continue to be work on these key strategies.

Of course, our most urgent current issue is working with the government to deal with the impacts of the cold spring weather and drought that have affected producers across much of Alberta. We have been written to Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) and the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) with suggestions for actions that will help cattle producers facing an extreme shortage of pasture and feed. ARD and AFSC have been very cooperative in their response to this situation and have taken a number of positive steps to help producers. The provincial and federal governments have expressed a desire to assist producers through existing business risk management programs and we understand the desire for this approach. However, we see the need for improvements in these programs if they are going to be fully effective in providing the assistance cattle producers will need to deal with the drought. ABP will continue corresponding and meeting with ARD and AFSC officials on this issue. ▼