

# SDSU Extension: A Look At The Early Weaning Beef Calves

BROOKINGS — Although spring and summer rains have relieved drought concerns for most of South Dakota, there still may be situations where forage is limited.

On cattle operations where forage is limited, Warren Rusche, SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist, said early weaning may be the most effective way to add body condition on cows.

"Between reduced nutrient requirements and feed intake for the cow, plus the forage that the calf would have consumed, early weaning results in a 28 percent reduction in daily forage demand," Rusche said. "That difference could be enough to either avoid deeper culling during drought or extend the grazing season long enough to save significant amounts of winter feed."

Rusche added that as long as they have high quality diets to eat, early-weaned calves generally are more efficient, compared to calves weaned at older ages. "Feed conversions around 5 pounds of feed to 1 pound of gain are certainly possible," he said.

At weaning, calves require a diet that contains about 16 percent crude protein and 70 percent total digestible nutrients (TDN). "Typical diets are about 60 percent grain and 10 to 20 percent higher protein ingredients, with the balance of the ration comprised of higher fiber/roughage feedstuffs, as well as vitamins and minerals," Rusche said.

## MARKETING EARLY-WEANED CALVES

Marketing early-weaned calves at weaning can be a major drawback to this system, Rusche explained. "Depending on the price



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slide in place at sale time, younger calves will obviously weigh less, and might bring fewer dollars to the ranch," he said.

Finding buyers that want to feed and buy lightweight calves is another obstacle Rusche explained. "Not every feeder is set-up to handle and manage very young cattle, which can affect the number of potential buyers and how aggressively they bid on lightweight calves," Rusche said.

If calves are retained on the ranch, the additional feed required must be considered when evaluating whether or not to wean early, he explained. "Early-weaned calves will spend more total days on harvested feed, but will usually reach slaughter weight at a younger age," Rusche said. "The age difference could be a significant advantage if they are finished before seasonal market declines occur."

## CREEP FEED SUCCESS

Some producers have successfully weaned calves on pasture with a creep feeder. Once calves were consuming sufficient amounts of creep feed, the cows are sorted off leaving the calves behind. "This works particularly well for older cows with lower milk production that are due to be culled," Rusche said.

He added that using feedstuffs such as small grain regrowth, cover crop or crop residue is another strategy to cut costs.

Another concern is keeping calves healthy. Because these calves do not have to deal with colder, wetter weather, Rusche explained that they can transition through the weaning process relatively well, provided they consume enough feed during the receiving phase. They can also get the benefit of some disease protection from maternal antibodies.

Producers should consult

with their veterinarian for a health plan specifically designed for their operation.

Like many management practices, Rusche said the decision to wean early should be based on the individual ranch circumstances. Early weaning is more likely to be economically viable when:

- Forage quantity limits performance, due to either growing conditions or stocking rate decisions.
- Cows are thin, especially if they are young.
- The ranch has the ability to manage young calves, or there are enough buyers willing to purchase early-weaned calves without discounts.
- The combination of reduced demands on pasture, improvements in body condition and reproduction, and the value of feed efficiency benefits are great enough to overcome the increased feed costs and management required.

## Commentary

# Fencing Not Fun, But It's Needed

BY RITA BRHEL  
P&D Correspondent

We were in a bit of a hurry when we fenced our fifth paddock of our pasture. See, we live on the edge of a small town, and the City Council wanted to clean up abandoned lots before the annual town festival and that last paddock looked like an abandoned lot. It had been fenced when we bought our acreage six years ago, but since that time, we'd taken down the rotten wood railings, leaving the solid posts. We were planning on fencing it at some point, but with all the rain we had this year, we simply didn't need the extra forage - yet.

So, in the City's defense, the fifth paddock did look a little rough, a lot like an abandoned lot.

It looks a lot nicer now that we got a fence up.

With the City's blessing, we were able to put a fence up on the paddock - rather than mow it - but we had to do it before the town festival, in only about three weeks. It was right after county fair, and during the hottest part of the summer. We were a bit short on extra cash at that point in the year, too. The end result is a fence that looks good on the outside but is a bit sloppy from a livestock grazer's perspective.

We do custom grazing. The pasture is the only real money-maker on the place.

Our customer is a rancher a county over to keep his rams. We do management-intensive rotational grazing, so we are able to keep more livestock on our five acres than someone who opens up the entire pasture to continuous grazing.

How it works is that we keep the animals on a single paddock for a short period of time - during this time of the year, it's about one week - and then move them to the next paddock. It doesn't matter if there is still grass and forage to be eaten in the paddock. The herd is rotated to each new paddock on a set schedule: first paddock, second, third, fourth, fifth and back to the first.

This gives the animals tasty, new growth each week and gives each paddock a rest period for that new growth to occur.

With five paddocks, each paddock rests for about a month right now. There can be a lot of new growth in a month. We shorten or lengthen the time on each paddock according to the seasonal growth: two or three days in the spring, 10 days to two weeks in the fall.

So, with the fifth paddock fenced, we now have more space and feed for more animals. And we now have more rams. That's great! But the fence on the fifth paddock still needs work. It's woven wire can definitely keep in calm animals, but anything spooks them - like the occasional dog off the leash - our slapped-up fencing job likely wouldn't hold up.

Fencing can be frustrating work. It's definitely labor-intensive, and expensive. We have a perimeter fence of wooden posts, woven wire and barbed wire. This may be all that is needed to keep cattle in, but this is mostly for show with sheep. We line the inside of the perimeter fence with high-tensile. This is what keep the sheep in, and predators and neighborhood dogs out. The paddocks are also high-tensile.

High-tensile is so named because the wires are kept "tense" in that they are stretched from end to end. We learned to put up and maintain high-tensile fence from my dad, who uses black tarp straps - only made in the USA, as foreign-made straps are more likely to wear sooner - at the ends of the stretched wire to keep it taut.

High-tensile works better for sheep, because the wire is less likely to get caught up in the weeds or wrapped around an animal's leg, for instance. But when something does break on high-tensile, it can be a real pickle! Imagine pulling a rubber band to its max and making a fence out of these taut rubber bands, and then one of them breaks. To combat the potential to find a ball of wire out in the pasture, the fence needs to be checked regularly for signs of wear and tear, and if an insulator or tarp strap or another fence component shows signs of stress, it's best to replace it before it breaks.

So, on this fifth paddock, we put up the perimeter fence but still need to do the inside high-tensile. Now with fall approaching - and also with more sheep in the pasture as of yesterday - we need to get in and get it done. Putting up fence is not something I, or many other people, look forward to, but it'll be nice when its done.



Rita BRHEL

# SDSU Survey Takes Closer Look At Farmland Leasing Practices

BY KATHY MELAND  
Mitchell Technical Institute

The 2015 SDSU Farm Real Estate Survey was released in May, 2015 and contains a wealth of information on land values and cash rents. Once again, ag land values increased 1.4% from the previous year but at a much lower rate than last year's which came in at 6.1%. This marks a substantially lower growth rate than the prior three-year period of 2010 to 2013 which saw annual increases ranging from 16.5% to 33.6%. The 1.4% growth rate represents a decrease in crop land values of 4.8% but that was offset by a double-digit increase in rangeland and pasture values.

This large boom in land values has created some healthy profits for the landowner as well as the operator who has benefited from several years of great returns on row crops and, most recently, record-high cattle prices. I do see a few challenges on the horizon given the volatile nature of commodity prices and the threat of increasing interest

rates. There are certainly several other factors that could impact land values but the two I mentioned may have a more immediate effect. From a producer's point of view, there is the added risk of maintaining a good relationship with landlords in the current "boom" environment.

Along with the rising land values, cash rental rates have also experienced major increases with a wide range of values depending on the productivity of land. According to the 2007 SD Census of Agriculture, approximately 40% of South Dakota ag land is covered by some type of lease arrangement. At one time, "hand-shake" agreements were the standard practice and I am not sure how many land rents are still based on oral leases. Keep in mind that oral leases only run from year-to-year and automatically renew unless either the landlord or renter gives notice on or before September 1st. This arrangement probably served both parties quite well in the past but I strongly encourage the use of written leases in

order to clearly define the lease terms. According to South Dakota law, you need a written lease if you intend to rent farmland for more than one year at time.

In addition to having the lease terms in writing, it might be a good time to explore new leasing ideas given the explosive growth in both land values and cash rents. The flexible farm lease is a relatively new concept but seems to be a good solution for setting rental rates during periods of booming land prices and fluctuating commodity markets. The final rent is based on actual crop prices and/or production levels thereby allowing the risks and rewards to be more evenly shared between the landowner and operator. There are a variety of options to consider in structuring such an agreement and both parties must be willing to negotiate in good faith. I would encourage both the landowner and producer to review the 2015 Land Survey as it provides an excellent source of data in your local area. The publication is available on-line at:

www.igrow.org/up/resources/03-7008-2015.pdf.

If you would like additional information on this topic, please contact Kathy Meland, SD Center Farm/Ranch Management. My work cell phone is 1-605-299-6760 or check out our website: www.sdcfr.com.

## DESCRIPTION

The 2015 SDSU Farm Real Estate Survey was released in May, 2015 and contains a wealth of information on land values and cash rents. Once again, ag land values increased 1.4% from the previous year but at a much lower rate than last year's which came in at 6.1%. This marks a substantially lower growth rate than the prior three-year period of 2010 to 2013 which saw annual increases ranging from 16.5% to 33.6%. The 1.4% growth rate represents a decrease in crop land values of 4.8% but that was offset by a double-digit increase in rangeland and pasture values.

Kathy Meland is an SDCFRM instructor at Mitchell Technical Institute.

## Farm Bill MPP-Dairy Sign-Up Under Way Through Dec. 31

BROOKINGS — The sign-up period for the 2016 Milk Margin Protection Program for Dairy Producers (MPP-Dairy) is under way and runs through September 30 at your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office.

"The MPP-Dairy program is a voluntary safety net program established by the 2014 Farm Bill that continues through Dec. 31, 2018," said Tracey Erickson, SDSU Extension Dairy Field Specialist.

Erickson explained that the program provides eligible producers with indemnity payments when the difference between an all milk price and average feed cost (the margin), falls below coverage levels producers select on an annual basis.

To be eligible for MPP-Dairy, operations must produce and commercially market milk in the U.S., provide proof of milk production when registering, and not be enrolled in the Livestock Gross Margin for

Dairy program (LGM-Dairy).

"Eligible dairy operations must register for MPP-Dairy coverage at the FSA office where their records are stored," Erickson said.

To learn more, contact Erickson at tracey.erickson@sdsstate.edu.

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