

Weaning of Calves: Beef Cattle

Contact Details

Dr Motseki Hlatshwayo
Director: Animal and Aquaculture Production

Physical Address:
Directorate: Animal and Aquaculture Production
1st Floor, Delpen Building
Cnr. Anna Bolha & Union Streets
Riviera, Pretoria

Postal Address:
Private Bag X138
Pretoria
0001

Tel: 012-319 7882
Fax: 012-319 7570 / 7425

Web: www.nda.agric.za



agriculture

Department:
Agriculture
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



The methods and time of weaning play a vital role in the production of beef because they influence the weaning mass of calves as well as the condition of the cows, and subsequently their conception rates.

When to wean

- The farmer would like to produce as many calves as possible from the breeding stock. Therefore, weaning should enable a cow to calve every year by allowing her to regain condition after weaning.
- The ideal weaning age is when calves are 7 to 8 months.
- Other factors to consider are condition of a cow, drought, but not age of calves.
- The calf should be weaned before the cow's condition score goes below 2.5.
- During years of drought and poor feed supply, calves should be weaned early (before 6 months), to allow the cow to recover before the onset of winter.
- Calves born during spring (Eastern parts of the country); can be weaned early in May at the age of about 7 to 8 months.
- Calves can be weaned early June (Western parts of the country) at the age of about 7 to 8 months as the breeding season tends to be later in these areas.

Why wean early

- Calves can be weaned early only during times of severe drought or feed shortages.

- Calves weaned at a relatively young age are generally slow growers, and are susceptible to diseases.
- Calves should be supplemented with concentrates, but only if it is viable.
- The farmer should decide and act swiftly as to whether to wean or not when the condition of a cow deteriorates rapidly.
- Cows are more valuable than few months calves, therefore more attention should be given to the cows. However, the availability and costs of feeds will determine the decision the farmer has to take.
- Supplementing both cows (roughage) and calves (concentrates) can help.



How to wean

The farmer will determine the method of weaning, depending on the conditions on the farm level. The following methods can be used:

- Keep the calves in a kraal or well-fenced camp and remove the cows to a distant camp, preferably where the calves cannot hear sounds of cows.
- Remove the cows temporarily from a camp and in their absence move the calves to another distant camp. Cows tend to look for their calves in the camp in which they were last seen and this method should prevent the cows from breaking out of the camps.
- Exchange calves from two different herds. The calves will then have the company of cows.

Some cross-suckling is, however, likely to occur.

- Separate the cows and calves by a strong, close-strand wire fence. This method can reduce weaning stress.
- Nose plates, commercially available or homemade, can be fitted to calves for 7 to 14 days. These prevent suckling, even if cows and calves remain together throughout the weaning period. When the nose plates are removed the cows and calves are separated, but with relatively little stress.

Additional information

- Perform castration, dehorning and branding when calves are 8 to 10 months old, not immediately before weaning. This will ensure that the stress associated with these operations does not add to that of weaning.
- A few dry cows can be kept with the weaners to calm them.
- Provide sufficient good-quality roughage, water and shade in the weaning camps.
- To prevent excessive walking and trampling the camps should not be too large.
- The weaning process could last 7 to 14 days, depending on the age at which the calves are weaned as well as the breed of the cow.

