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Western Beef Resource Committee

# Cattle Producer's Library

Drought and Other Natural Disasters Section CL1100

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## Cattle Management During Drought

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Cattlemen have always depended on the weather for their livelihood. During drought, most producers are looking at a few management alternatives that are available to them.

Early weaning of calves is one possible option in drought situations that may give the producer an opportunity to reduce losses or avoid making forced sales of good breeding stock that would otherwise have to be sold on a low priced market. The early weaning program will depend upon the condition of the cow and the age of the calf.

Early weaning will permit more cows to be carried per acre of pasture, reducing the number of cows that may have otherwise had to be sold. In most cases, early weaning will mean the calves have to be fed in dry lot, therefore adding feed and overhead costs that would not be incurred on later-weaned calves.

With proper feeding management, however, early-weaned calves can grow as rapidly as they would have while in the nursing stage and in many cases will grow faster if the drought is very severe.

Returns would not be expected to increase by early weaning, so this system would only be used during times of short feed supplies and drought conditions. Calves that are weaned early should probably be classified into age groups and managed differently, depending upon their age. An adequate classification would be under 6 weeks, 6 weeks to 3 months, 3 to 6 months, and 6 months and older. Calves under 6 weeks should probably not be weaned unless absolutely necessary, since they need mother's milk and the cost of supplying this by artificial means is costly and risky to the life of the calf. Calves 3 to 6 months can be fed good quality hay and grain. Calves older than 6 months will require no special treatment other than the proper care and feeding. When calves are weaned early, they should be started on feed

about 3 weeks before weaning to ensure that they will eat after weaning.

Calves weaned from 3 to 6 months of age should be fed rations containing at least 12 to 14 percent protein. It may also be useful to add enough molasses to ensure that the calves are eating at least 3 percent of their body weight per day.

Calves older than 6 months should be fed good quality hay and a small amount of grain — 2 to 4 pounds per day. This should ensure that they are growing at a rate equivalent to what they would be if they were still nursing. The use of straws in growing calves has not been successful because straw has little energy in relation to the amount of bulk. It is also poor in palatability. If it is necessary that some straw be used in a calf ration, it should be only a small percentage of the ration.

Little or no green feed or carotene, which is converted to vitamin A for calves or cows, may occur during drought. Even though cattle can store vitamin A in their liver and fat from 4 to 6 months, supplementing vitamin A either in the ration or through vitamin A and D injections may be needed during drought.

Research has shown that early-weaned calves, with proper management and feeding, can equal weight of calves raised on their dam. In a study in Oklahoma, early-weaned calves from thin 2-year-old cows reared in dry lot weaned at about the same weight as calves raised on dams. Early weaning improved the heifer conception rates from 59 to 97 percent. Heifers with the early-weaned calves gained more in the fall than heifers that had suckled their calves. Another study in Kansas evaluated calves weaned at 50 days of age, with herd mates receiving creep feed or just allowed to nurse their dams in the dry lot without creep. The early-weaned calves gained more than either the creep-fed calves or the nursing-only calves during a trial period of 107 days.

During drought creep feeding is another alternative that some producers may wish to consider to ensure heavier calves at weaning. Under normal conditions, creep feeding has been a marginal management practice due to poor conversion rates of creep feed to increased weaning weights. Under drought, conditions with poor

milking cows, gains may be less. Creep feed has been more effective when cows are milking poorly because of poor range or because cows are young and not producing as much milk. Under most conditions grain can be used as a creep feed, since milk will serve to keep protein up to the level needed.



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Second edition; December 2004 Reprint