

When Should Fall-Born Calves be Weaned and Marketed?

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Many south Florida cattlemen use a breeding season to calve in the fall. When do you wean and sell your fall-born calves and why? Most ranchers wean their calves at a specific time each year. However, a rancher should study the feeder calf market, evaluate the condition of his cows and pastures, and then wean and market calves to maximize profits.

Florida ranchers wean fall-born calves from June to September at ages ranging from 6 to 10 months. To maintain a good calf crop and high weaning weights the following guidelines are offered on the age to wean fall-born calves. If cows are maintained in good condition (condition score 5 or higher) and pastures have adequate forage throughout the nursing period, calves can be left on the cow up to 9 or 10 months of age with no problems. If cows are in moderate to poor condition (condition score less than 5) and pastures are over utilized, it would be best to wean calves at 6 to 7 months of age. Weaning calves earlier will allow thin cows to regain body condition and go into the next calving and breeding seasons with a better chance to rebreed, and will probably wean a heavier calf. Calves nursing thin cows and grazed on poor pasture will have low weaning weights regardless of how long they remain on the cow.

Three research studies have evaluated the effects of weaning calves at 9 to 10 months of age. In each study cows were maintained in good body condition and pasture provided adequate forage. A five-year study on organic soils at Belle Glade showed that calves weaned at 10 months were 71 pounds heavier than calves weaned at 8 months. At Gainesville, calves weaned at 9 months were 137 pounds heavier than calves weaned at 7 months. In Oklahoma, a four-year study showed that calves weaned at 9½ months were 197 pounds heavier than calves weaned at 7 months. In each of these studies cows weaning late calves continued to graze pastures available, with no extra cost involved. Neither cow conception rate nor percent weaned calf crop were affected by calf weaning age in either study.

This research shows that south Florida cattlemen can take advantage of our excellent climate for growing forages well into late summer. Extending the nursing period of fall-born calves to 9 and 10 months is a management tool which offers Florida cow/calf

producers flexibility in utilizing resources and marketing their calf crop for maximum profit. Many of south Florida's better cattlemen take advantage of this option, but remember, pastures and the cow herd must be kept in good condition for late weaning of fall-born calves to work.

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