Best weaning practices

Fernando Soberon, Ph.D.
Shur-Gain U.S.A.
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Fernando.soberon@nutreco.ca

A successful weaning...

- The calf has a consistent intake of dry feeds
- The calf is capable of fermenting and utilizing the nutrients from dry feed
- The calf is capable of maintaining growth rate without milk or milk replacer intake
- The calf’s immune system is developed enough to successfully manage the stresses of this transition

Misconceptions of weaning

- If milk intake is restricted, calves will increase dry grain consumption and this will be a cheaper way to raise them
  - When calves are restricted from milk/milk replacer, their growth is restricted and DMI is correlated to size
  - Limiting growth during the pre-weaning period increases mortality, morbidity, feed efficiency and milk production. This alternative ends up being a lot more costly.
- Calves fed high amounts of milk/milk replacer don’t develop their rumen
  - Rumen development is conditional of VFA production; the timing of rumen development is not as critical as early life growth

Post-weaning DMI

Soberon and Van Amburgh, 2011
Traditional weaning protocols

- Weaning according to calf intake
  - Weaned when calves consume 2 lb of starter for 3 consecutive days
  - Hard to implement on large number of calves
  - It hasn’t been proven that 2 lb or 3 days are the right numbers
  - Weaned when calves consume 1 lb of starter for 5 consecutive days

- Weaning by age
  - One step down period of 1 week at half the feeding rate
  - Simple, straight forward, easy to implement
  - No data suggesting this a better system
  - Two step down periods of 1 week each
  - Not so simple or straightforward
  - Few data supporting its efficacy

Shur-Gain research

- Determine differences in calf performance as well as rumen development for calves under two different weaning strategies
  - An important question to answer is if calves consuming large amounts of milk replacer can be successfully weaned by age
  - Another objective is to develop a consistent method to measure rumen development

The treatments

CON has weaning criteria based on 1kg dry feed intake metric (day 35-65)
TEST has no weaning criteria (day 49)

Preliminary results
Rumen development

Weaning best practices

- Promote dry feed intake by:
  - Providing free access to fresh water at all times
  - Offer small amounts of a fresh, high quality, and palatable calf starter
  - After 35 days of age, reduce milk/milk replacer intake to half its regular allowance to stimulate dry feed intake
  - Provide sufficient milk/milk replacer to cover maintenance during the step down period
  - Calves consume more dry feed when in groups
  - Reduce other stressors during this time:
    - Don’t dehorn, vaccinate or move at the same time they are being weaned

Questions