

Range Beef Cow Symposium XX

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Benefits of Weaning Calves at Younger Ages

by **Tosha Powell**

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (Dec. 15, 2007) — Barry Dunn designed a graphic called the Ranch Wheel. In the wheel there are spokes that represent the things that make up the ranch, said Trey Patterson at the 20th Range Beef Cow Symposium in Fort Collins, Colo., Dec. 12.

“The question we have to ask ourselves is what drives this wheel,” Patterson said. “The things that force us to make managerial decisions on our ranches are stress and conflict, such as droughts, poor markets and high prices.”

Patterson said a possible solution to the stress and conflicts is having an organized decision-making process. One of the tools that can be used in this process is weaning calves at an earlier date than normal.

“There are a couple of different ways to outline early weaning dates,” Patterson said. “Weaning before the start of the breeding season has shown to improve reproductive performance during the year. Improved reproduction can be due to removal of the sucking stimulus or from improved energy balance of the cattle. Weaning calves late in the breeding season likely will not yield any improvements in reproduction during the year in which calves are weaned.”

Patterson cited a study developed by a group of scientists from South Dakota State



► **Trey Patterson**

University, North Dakota State University and the University of Wyoming to evaluate early weaning of beef calves. The scientists used a two-year period to evaluate the correlation of weaning dates to the body condition score of cows.

“Calf gains were similar overall, but the early-weaned calves were significantly more efficient at converting feed to gain in

two of the three locations,” Patterson said. “Finishing performance was not markedly different between treatments, except early-weaned calves finished at an average 32 days younger with 51 additional days on feed.”

The commercial cattle business is run on weight, Patterson said, and weight is an important factor in selling calves. The Padlock Ranch, where Patterson is employed, weans earlier than normal if necessary to manage body condition score (BCS) and to manage grass during drought conditions.

“Weaning calves early is not a magic bullet,” Patterson said. “Every business needs to make this calculation given current costs and markets to make a wise decision. Do not forget to look at the whole system when making a decision on time of weaning.”

The cooperative extension services and animal science departments of Colorado State University, South Dakota State University, the University of Wyoming and the University of Nebraska hosted the Range Beef Cow Symposium Dec. 11-13 at the Larimer County Fairgrounds and Events Complex near Fort Collins.

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