



RED DEER IN A FARM SYSTEM

Weaning

What is 'weaning'? some triggers for management

Weaning is the physical separation of calves from the hinds so that the calves are no longer dependent on their mothers for food (milk) and security. This enables the calves and hinds to be managed separately within the farm system.

In the wild, calves are naturally weaned within their first year, but the actual timing can vary between individuals. Natural weaning seldom suits the management needs of the farming operation. Most farmers, therefore, impose active weaning management on their herds.

What do I need to consider at weaning?

There is no firm or fixed rule about which weaning style is appropriate; wean in whatever manner and at whichever time suits the needs of your production system. However, there are certain trade-offs with each weaning style.

You need to consider-

- minimising calf (and dam) stress to ensure minimal disruption to calf growth and wellbeing;
- optimising feed supply to ensure adequate nutrition;
- optimising condition gain (i.e. body condition score) in hinds to maintain a consistent conception rate and calving date; and.
- implementation of calf health treatments such as anthelmintics and vaccinations.

Some targets to consider

- Less than 1% death rate
- No reduction in potential post weaning growth rate

Some triggers for management

When making your decisions about when and how to wean consider the following factors

- Hind Condition in August – A low condition will make conception even later
- Calf weight early September – higher weights make weaning easier
- Feed availability and quality – weaning early helps increase your control over the feed supply
- Introduction of supplements or specialist forages – should be introduced before weaning for maximum effect. Whilst still on mum the weaners will take up supplements quicker.

Weaning options

Pre-rut weaning

Pre-rut weaning is when calves and hinds are separated before the rut, usually in late August –Mid September, when the calves are 3-4 months of age.

The **advantages** of pre-rut weaning are that it allows-

- optimisation and prioritisation of feeding management for different stock classes well before the onset of winter;
- pre-winter accustomisation of calves to desired grazing systems and supplementary feeds;
- simplification and implementation of a targeted health management regimen for calves (e.g. anthelmintic treatments);



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- simplification of mating management of hinds (especially for setting up single-sire mating programmes); and
- termination of lactation to allow hinds to improve condition before mating (i.e. improve mating success).

Disadvantages of pre-rut weaning may include the following things:

- stress on young calves due to physical separation from dams; growth rates can be checked for several weeks;
- compromisation of feed planning for newly weaned calves in dry conditions; and.
- physical injury of young calves if there has been no prior habituation to movements/handling.

Post-rut weaning

Post-rut weaning (November-December) is when calves and hinds are separated after the rut, usually in November-December, when the calves are 6-7 months of age.

The **advantages** of post-rut weaning include:

- reduced workload on farm prior to rut;
- less stress on calves ; and
- much lower risk of severe pre-winter growth checks in calves.

Disadvantages of post-rut weaning may include:

- compromisation of hind condition, may be by lactation leading into the rut, leading to negative impacts on pregnancy rate and/or conception date;
- calf removal at the start of winter being complicated by bad weather if weaning outside or overwintering calves outside.;
- limited opportunities to habituate calves to winter management regimens;
- pre-weaning health treatment of calves being complicated by the presence of hinds; and
- sorting of hinds into mating groups being complicated by the presence of calves.

Natural weaning

Natural weaning is when hinds and calves are left to their own devices as in most deer parks. Most calves will be naturally weaned between January- February, when they are 9-10 months of age.

The **advantages** of the natural weaning approach are:

- minimal social disruption and minimal stress on offspring;
- that simplicity of farm design (e.g. minimal paddock subdivision) doesn't suit early calf separation; and
- that it suits a very "hands-off" farming style.
- However, natural weaning systems have the following major disadvantages :
- very limited flexibility around feed management to optimise both reproductive performance of hind and growth performance of calves;
- affords limited opportunities to habituate young stock to handling and to conduct health treatments; and
- sub-optimal tameness of calves (could be important when sending young stock for slaughter).



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Stress and weaning

Weaning can engender stress amongst hinds and calves, especially where poor weaning practices are employed.

Effects of weaning stress

In **weaned stock**, the effect of stress related to poor weaning practice include-

- injuries (e.g. fence impacts and foot damage);
- excessive fence pacing; severe growth checks for 2-4 weeks after weaning; and
- increased susceptibility to parasites and pathogens.

The stressed weaners will cause the following types of **property damage**:

- tracking, fence damage and soil compaction (from excessive fence pacing); and
- trampled and wasted pasture.

Although not generally as stressed as their offspring, in severe circumstances **hinds** can also exhibit or suffer from the negative effects of bad weaning practice, including:

- i. reduced reproductive productivity (e.g. later conceptions); and
- ii. physical injuries during handling.

Minimising weaning stress

It is important to find a weaning system that works well for your farm and management style. Good weaning practices designed to reduce the stress of calves (and hinds) are as follows:

Where possible, pre-condition hinds and calves to the intended post-weaning grazing management system (e.g. rotational grazing, strip grazing, crop feeding) or handling system before the date of weaning.

- Minimise treatment of calves at time of weaning if they are potentially painful or stressful (e.g. ear tagging, vaccination). It is usually better to perform these treatments well before or after weaning.
- Anthelmintic treatment may be necessary at the time of weaning to ensure against parasite problems over the next few weeks.
- Following hind/calf separation, it is generally considered beneficial to return calves to the paddock they were mustered from and to send hinds to a different paddock some distance from the calves. (Some farmers prefer running hinds and calves in neighbouring paddocks to “soften” the weaning process)..
- Some systems utilise a period of calf retention indoors on hard feed for periods of 1-2 weeks. This requires considerable pre-weaning conditioning to the feed offered. Farmers using this system comment on the overall tameness of the calves following a return to pasture.
- Avoid weaning calves during bad weather. Some flexibility around actual weaning dates is required.
- “Soft” weaning approaches include introducing tame or dry hinds to newly weaned calves to act as a maternal surrogate.
- Avoid excessive use of dogs and other unfamiliar disturbances during the first few weeks of weaning.
- Plan for and maintain a high plane of nutrition for weaned animals to take their minds off mum’s milk. Don’t let their paddock get “stale”: a fresh bite keeps their minds off mum’s milk.
- Establish a regular routine (e.g. paddock rotation, handling for health management) early on.
- Remove sick or highly stressed individuals from the weaned calf mob as soon as possible. Such individuals can cause considerable disruption to the weaned herd.

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- If herd size justifies such an approach, consider establishing separate weaned mobs based on uniformity of animal size within each group. This reduces undesirable social impacts, particularly on the smaller individuals.
- For mixed genotype herds (e.g. red vs. wapiti), it is desirable to establish separate weaned mobs based on breed type.
- Be patient when moving young stock from paddock to paddock, or into the handling system. Remember that they are generally not familiar with gateways and raceways. Give them time and space to find their way through open gateways and down the raceway.