

## **Developing a weaning or receiving program**

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As we enter the fall months, weaning time is at hand for most spring calving herds. This is the exciting time of year when producers are able to reap the benefits of a year’s worth of work and planning. The weaning period is a critical time in that calf’s life, and without proper planning can set that calf behind for the rest of its lifetime. A weaning or receiving program should include a health plan, nutrition plan, and a plan to adjust calves to new surroundings.

A good weaning or receiving program should have several objectives. The ultimate goal of any program is to reduce the inherent stress from weaning or shipping. Along with this, another objective should be to develop immunity and fight off new disease challenges. The third objective of a receiving or weaning program involves the behavior of cattle. During this time, calves are asked to immediately adapt to new surrounding and perhaps even new penmates. They must learn to eat and drink from feed bunks and water troughs, and adjust to a new social hierarchy. Based on these objectives, the primary goals of this program should be to keep cattle healthy and have them start eating quickly.

The health component of the weaning or receiving program is often the first part of the program that most producers consider. Specifics of a health program should be tailored to both an operation and cattle’s needs. It is important to work closely with a local veterinarian familiar with the operation, and type of cattle. Following Beef Quality Assurance guidelines should also be an integral part of a health program. Since weaning can be such a stressful time in a calf’s life, it is generally recommended initial vaccinations should be given prior to weaning to allow calves time to develop immunity before being introduced to the stress of weaning. Boosters can then be given at weaning. It is important to pay attention to label directions as some vaccines may differ. Although the components of each health plan will differ in regards to specifics, several management practices are generally recommended. Cattle should be dewormed, vaccinated for Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Parainfluenza-3 (PI-3), Bovine Respiratory Syncytial Virus (BRSV), and Blackleg (7-way Clostridial), tested for persistently infected BVD, and implanted with growth-promoting compounds if desired. Additional treatments and vaccinations may be needed based on veterinary advice.

The nutritional component is a critical piece of any weaning or receiving program. Nutrition can come in the form of pasture or hay and supplement. Regardless of its form or delivery method, stimulating intake quickly, and getting feed into calves early is vital. Without sufficient feed intake, calves will not only lose weight, but they may be more susceptible to disease. It is important to remember that feed intake will likely be low in the initial part of the period. It is important to provide a feed source that is highly palatable (calves should want to eat it), nutrient dense (calves will only eat small amounts), and contains the right blend of nutrients to meet the requirements based on size and expected feed intake.

There are numerous diet options available. Some involve a fence-line weaning system with high quality pasture and supplement. Another option involves a dry or small grassy lot with a nutrient dense supplement and access to hay. Regardless of the chosen system, it is important that the diet is made of high quality ingredients that are highly digestible. Remember that all feed ingredients are not created equally. Delivery of the feed or supplement should also be taken into

consideration. Time and labor are important to consider. For a producer with a full time job away from the ranch, a self-fed option may be the best choice, as feed is available to cattle 24 hours a day regardless of your availability. For producers with access to storage bays and feeding equipment, hand feeding to provide a constant source of fresh feed may be a good option.

The chosen diet should also be supplemented with a good mineral program. Minerals and vitamins are essential at this time of high stress. Several vitamins and minerals have been shown to have a big impact on immune function. Selenium and vitamin E both have properties as antioxidants. The trace mineral zinc is important to the function of the immune response which is particularly important during this time. Copper is also a mineral important to immune function which is an essential part of several enzymes of the immune system.

It is also important to consider the form in which the individual minerals are provided. How available the mineral is to the animal depends on its form. Some mineral forms are highly available, while some forms are almost completely unavailable to the animal. Be sure to pay attention to the ingredient list on mineral tags. Typically, if a mineral is in an oxide form, such as copper oxide, it is not very available to the animal, and not likely a good purchase.

Planning in advance and considering each part of the weaning or receiving program is vital to its success. A sound program is one that is tailored to the producer's needs, and one that achieves the desired results. Reaping the benefits of a well-designed program is within reach for any producer and requires only a small amount of planning and advance consideration.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit [msucares.com/livestock/beef](http://msucares.com/livestock/beef).