

# Taking the bawl out of the calves

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A relatively small investment in time and equipment can make a big difference in the stress levels of early-weaned calves.

Derek Haley, an assistant professor with the Ontario Veterinary College, says the system involves a two-stage weaning process.

Calves are equipped with a nose flap for three or four days which prevents them from suckling but allows them to remain with their mothers before being separated.

"We're talking about a 95 per cent decrease in calling with two-stage weaning compared with abrupt weaning," Haley told farmers gathered at Southwest Beef Focus in Alvinston on March 30.

"People are always talking about weaning age, but I'm here to say it's more about the weaning method."

The cows were also less vocal when the two-stage approach is used. In addition, the volume of calls for both cows and calves was much lower, Haley says.

"I'm not going to try to develop

a dictionary for cattle vocabulary but I know they're not vocalizing the same message."

Calves also spent less than half the time walking about after separation and were eating up to 30 per cent more. There was a reduction in the level of aggression between animals.

Haley says further study is needed to determine if the two-stage strategy has an impact on long-term calf performance.

The core part of the study involved closely observing three groups of calves over a period of 11 days.

All three groups were left with their mothers for two days with no changes in order to establish a baseline observation period. Then two of the groups were equipped with the simple plastic nose flaps designed to keep them from suckling but they were still able to access feed.

"I think that when those flaps go on it would work even better if they had access to creep feed too," Haley says.

On the seventh day, the nose flaps were removed from the two-stage calves and they were



**This simple nose flaps keep calves from nursing. As part of a two-stage weaning process, it can markedly reduce stress in early-weaned calves.**

separated from their mothers. The other group which had still been suckling was also separated.

Haley says the study was originally conceived in order to determine whether the loss of milk or the loss of the social contact between mother and calf creates the most stress.

Anti-suckling devices are not new. Patents were granted for a variety of designs back in the 1800s and they're still common in other parts of the world.

Haley has been looking at other methods to reduce calve stress levels. One intermediate step that can be taken is to sim-

ply wean calves to a location adjacent to the cows – the fence-line method.

While the calves are still abruptly weaned, they tend to spend less time walking around and bawling and more time eating. Weight gain is also improved, at least in the short term.

Traditionally in North America, calves are weaned in a cold-turkey fashion – and are sometimes trucked at the same time.

Along with the stress of separation and loss of milk access, calves face handling and transport stress, the stress of being

mixed with unfamiliar animals and they may even be dehorned or castrated if these procedures had been missed.



**Derek Haley**