

## PRODUCERS WITH LARGE HERDS ARE BELIEVERS IN LOW STRESS WEANING

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*Editor's note: The following is the second in a two-part series. See [part-one](#) about the research behind two-stage weaning.*

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Producers who have tried it, say they are sold on reduced-stress weaning techniques. Of four beef producers across Canada contacted who have used low stress weaning measures for several years, one favoured the fence line low stress weaning system, while the others all preferred the two-stage weaning system, commercially known as QuietWean.

Fence-line weaning, which has been used by some producers for generations, is a low-stress one-stage weaning system that involves sorting cows and calves on weaning day and then dividing the two groups with some type of fencing. Cows and calves can still see each other, and often can still have nose-to-nose contact, but the fencing prevents calves from nursing. In most set ups cows and calves can wander away from the fence line to continue feeding or grazing. After about three or four days the two groups appear to lose interest in each other — weaning is complete.

The two-stage system, which has come along over the past 20 years, involves two sorting and calf handling operations. The first handling operation, involves collecting and restraining calves to attach or clip a plastic nose flap into the nostrils of the calves anywhere from four to seven days before actual weaning day. The cow-calf pairs are then returned to pasture. The flaps prevent the majority of calves from being able to nurse. After the four to seven days (ideally after five or six days) calves are again sorted off through handling facilities — the reusable nose flaps are removed — and then cows and calves are permanently separated — again, weaning is complete.

While there are some perceptions that two-stage weaning is more suited to smaller beef herd operations, producers with anywhere from 300 head to 1,100 head of calves to wean say the extra time and management to attach and retrieve nose flaps is worth the effort. In some cases, calves are being processed anyway, and with multiple hands on deck, the nose flaps can be put in place while other procedures are being completed. Some producers also find the nose flaps can be removed at final sorting without restraining calves.

With both systems, producers report obvious reduced stress — compared to cold or abrupt weaning — with little or no instances of either cows or calves pacing or bawling for two, three or more days looking for each other. The low-stress approach eases the calves into weaning with much reduced stress, with all producers reporting by their own observations improved performance and health of the calves compared to abrupt weaning.

### HENRY MCCARTHY, DVM

WAWOTA, SK.

Henry McCarthy wears two hats when he talks about the value of low-stress weaning. McCarthy is both a veterinarian, operating McCarthy Veterinary Services and he's also a Saskatchewan rancher himself. He's been around low-stress weaning since he was in high school and worked on a large southern Alberta ranching operation, where they'd used reduced-stress fence line weaning as long as anyone could remember.

"I would definitely recommend producers adopt some type of low stress weaning," says McCarthy. The benefits are obvious in his experience. "There's a lot less stress on the calf, which leads to less disease

and reduced use of antibiotics,” he says. “And if it’s done right those calves don’t even miss a beat — they just go right on to feed, so shrinkage is way less too.”

While the nose-flap system works well, McCarthy personally favours fence-line weaning. “I think it is the best system just because it is less handling of the calves meaning less time they have to spend in the chute,” he says. “Anytime you have to handle them it causes some degree of stress.”

McCarthy says fence-line weaning requires a decent fence, but nothing exceptional. He has seen producers use page-wire fencing, barbed wire fencing properly spaced for calves and even hot-wire fencing.

“Doesn’t matter what system you are using, the key is to handle them quietly,” says McCarthy. “Calves really won’t bother a fence unless they are rattled. Sort them quietly, handle the cows calmly.”

He does recommend it is best not to give booster shot vaccinations to calves at the same time as they are being weaned with either of the weaning systems. The calves are already dealing with some level of stress — being handled, being separated from their mothers — so vaccinating at that same time as weaning can reduce the effectiveness of the vaccine. “If you can’t give the booster two weeks to a month before weaning, don’t do it on weaning day,” he says. “Wait until those calves are well settled, calmed down and eating again. Even a week after processing should be sufficient and if time gets away and you don’t get to it until a month after weaning that’s okay.”

### **MIKE BUIS CHATHAM, ON**

Mike Buis has been a believer in two-stage weaning on his southwest Ontario farm for the past 10 years.

He did cold wean calves at one time, he also tried fence-line weaning but found two-stage weaning worked best for his commercial cow-calf/finishing/meat retail operation.

“It’s just made a huge difference in reducing the stress on calves,” says Buis. “With this two-stage weaning system calves are back on feed as soon as they are weaned with much less stress-related illness.”

Buis runs about 300 head of commercial Red and Black Angus cattle in two separate calving herds. The main herd of about 225 head calves in early April, while about 75 head calve in the fall.

“With a retail business where we promote low stress, humanely raised, antibiotic-free beef, we were looking for a better way to handle weaning than just cold weaning,” says Buis. “But today even if we didn’t have the meat business this is the way I would produce beef.”

Obviously with the cold weaning, calves demonstrated a lot of vocalization, a lot pacing and generally a lot of stress at weaning. He didn’t have a great experience with fence-line weaning — fences just didn’t seem to hold the cows or calves apart. The two-stage system fit his facilities and management. The system he’s developed with the 225 head spring-calving herd, for example, is to aim to wean calves in November. About a month before weaning he processes calves to vaccinate as well as to castrate and dehorn any calves that might have been missed with banding as day-old calves. And since he uses polled breeding stock, few calves need dehorning. After processing calves in late September they head back to pasture with their mothers.

Calves are brought back to the chute in early November to attach the nose flaps, then return to the cows where they eat and drink normally, except no milk. “It does take a few hours to collect and sort a couple hundred head and attach the nose flaps, but it does go quite smoothly and quickly,” he says.

Then about five days later the weaned calves are brought in again to have the nose flaps removed. All calves he keeps for the farm meat retail program go directly into feeding facilities.

“The first year we used QuietWean we did our own on-farm trial,” he says — some of the calves received nose flaps and another group were cold weaned.

“It made a huge difference,” says Buis. “On separation day when the QuietWean tags were removed, those calves just went to the feed bunk and started eating. The ones without QuietWean were vocalizing, pacing and not eating properly for several days.”

He also noted that among the cold-weaned group about four per cent had to be treated with antibiotics for shipping fever. “Among those with the nose flaps we pulled zero,” he says. “That convinced us.” Buis figures the nose tags are a good investment. They are quite affordable (on-line pricing of QuietWean tags show the cost ranges from about \$1.50 to \$2 per tag depending on quantity). Since they are only used about five days out of the year they will last for several calf crops. “They might lose the odd nose flap especially if calves are grouped in a pen, but if the calves are on pasture they seldom lose one.”

He did say with some voice of experience, if you do decide to clean a bunch of tags in the dishwasher don’t tell your spouse. He finds the washing machine is a better option.

Whatever method is used, it is important to properly clean nose flaps after each season of use. Disinfection is also recommended.

### **MELISSA ATCHISON PIPESTONE, MB**

Melissa Atchison estimates on their southwest Manitoba cow-calf and backgrounding operation that two-stage weaning has reduced the number of sick calves that needs to be treated after weaning by about 85 per cent.

“Really, the difference is just phenomenal,” says Atchison who ranches with husband Trevor and young family on a century farm near Pipestone, about half an hour south of Virden. She’s been using the two-stage weaning system for about six years.

“For many years we just cold weaned calves but then we started looking at some alternatives, started reading some of the research about weaning stress on calves as well as the positive effects of two-stage weaning. Once we tried it, we were convinced.”

The Atchison’s run about 850 head of commercial cattle that begin calving in April. They aim to wean calves in late November. About mid-November they gather the herd in two batches processing them first to vaccinate and attach the nose flaps.

They have good handling facilities for calves to move through smoothly and be held briefly in a headgate to have the nose flaps clipped into place. “We are big believers in low stress cattle handling and our animals appear comfortable with being moved and sorted,” she says. After each group has been processed, cow-calf pairs head back to pasture together for about five days before they are collected again. Calves are sorted off, nose flaps removed and then they are moved into a backgrounding feed yard — calves are held in a drylot for a day or so to get settled and then have access to about 20 acres with feed troughs and bale feeder rings.

Very few of the nose flaps are lost on pasture, “but you can sure tell which calves did lose their flaps,” she says. “After weaning every calf that kept their nose flaps is just quietly eating or drinking, while the few that lost theirs are pacing and bawling and looking for their mothers. She acknowledges it does take extra time and management to collect and sort more than 800 calves to attach and remove nose flaps, but the extra processing steps are well worth the benefits.

“Calves lay down and chew their cud in addition to eating and drinking right away. They just are far more content than when we cold weaned and we’d see them put on many miles pacing the fence and

bawling. Losing milk and mama on the same day is tough. This way they are already accustomed to life without milk so the transition to life without mom is much easier.”

As calves immediately take to feed after weaning, Atchison is sure the weaning system improves rates of gain, with none of the set back that’s expected with a cold weaning system.

“And we just don’t have the sickness in calves that we use to see shortly after cold weaning,” she says.

“I’m sure there’s at least an 80 to 85 per cent decrease in sickness. We don’t have those treatment costs, and at the same time we are paying good money for vaccines so you want them to work. Once you pull a calf and start treating it, it seems to be an uphill battle to get it back to full health.”

Atchison says the nose flaps are durable and can be used for several calf crops. She estimates about two per cent might be lost each season. She finds it fairly convenient to clean the tags in batches in hot water in a larger laundry sink.

While she appreciates the benefit of improving animal welfare with reduced stress at weaning, she also hasn’t overlooked the value of going to bed during weaning season with a quiet herd in the yard.

### **JIM LYNCH-STAUNTON LUNDBRECK, AB**

Jim Lynch-Staunton agrees that two-stage weaning isn’t a perfect “no stress” system for weaning calves, but for his southern Alberta ranching operation it is far and away better than the old “cold turkey” weaning method.

Cows and calves aren’t bawling and pacing for several days, fences aren’t busted, calf performance doesn’t suffer any setbacks, instances of calf disease and death are greatly reduced, and he doesn’t have to listen to the noise.

Lynch-Staunton who ranches near Lundbreck, about 90 minutes west of Lethbridge, says in the 12 to 14 years he’s been using the QuietWean two-stage weaning system, he’s had a few instances when he had to revert to cold weaning calves and it served as a good reminder of why he is a “huge fan” of two-stage weaning.

“I’m just reminded of the distress these animals go through,” says Lynch-Staunton who produces Beef Booster M1 seed stock cattle. “On transition day, the calves that have been on the two-stage system just go into the backgrounding lot and start eating, even if they aren’t familiar with the feed. Those who haven’t will fret quite a bit more and will have a much more difficult time making the transition.”

Over the past few years, Lynch-Staunton has been weaning between 900 to 1,100 head of calves each November using the QuietWean system. The ranch and small feedlot operate with a low-stress handling philosophy. He says his cattle handling facilities aren’t quite as “smooth flow” as they could be but they do all they can to minimize stress.

With weaning set for around November 1st, calves are run through the chute, caught in a headgate about five to seven days before the targeted “transition” day to get the nose flaps clipped into place. At the same time, calves also receive vaccination and an ivermectin treatment before being returned to pasture with their mothers. “We’re processing several hundred calves anyway so it doesn’t take any longer for a pair of hands to quickly attach the nose flaps,” he says.

About five days later the herd is sorted for the final time with nose flaps removed. Calves go into the backgrounding feedyard, while cows head back out to pasture.

“I know handling these calves twice does cause them some stress,” he says. “But generally throughout the year we do practice low stress handling. The first processing includes shots and nose flaps, but in the days following that the calves are also still with their mothers so that should help ease some of their stress.”

And the second processing to remove the nose flaps is geared to minimize stress as much as possible. Removing the nose flaps is probably even a bit easier than putting them in, says Lynch-Staunton. If calves are held in a tight group in a pen he can usually just quietly walk among them and just pull many of the nose flaps free.

Overall he doesn't think there is a long-term weight gain advantage if he compares calves that have been weaned with a two-stage method versus cold weaned calves. The advantage does come with improved health among two-stage weaned calves.

"We have never mass treated our calves with antibiotics anyway," says Lynch-Staunton. Any treatments are provided on a case-by-case basis. "First of all I don't want to get addicted to mass treating just because it is convenient, because I believe the days of that practice are limited. There is already more regulation and I believe eventually it will be banned. But since we have been using the two-stage weaning we have seen a dramatic reduction in the number of calves that do get sick as well as reduced death loss." Figures from his feedlot health consulting services show the sickness and mortality rates for his feedlot are at least 50 per cent lower than other operations receiving cold weaned calves.

Lynch-Staunton says he believes the two-stage weaning system fits with the consumer and beef industry trends. "First I believe it is a much more humane way to wean calves, and that's important on several levels. I also believe the beef industry will be under more pressure to reduce the use of antibiotics so we will have to look at different ways to reduce sickness in cattle with less reliance on antibiotics. We may have to relearn some of the old handling and livestock management practices." He did have one caution for anyone using the nose-flap system in areas where the onset of winter is unpredictable at weaning. If a cold snap hits, calves are particularly sensitive if the nose flaps ice up. He's learned from experience that calves will still graze but they may be reluctant to stick their nose into an iced-up trough or other water source — meaning they go without water. "All I can recommend is to watch the weather forecast and if it looks like bad weather is coming you may want to delay attaching the nose flaps during a cold or stormy period," says Lynch-Staunton.