



DIBS

**Dairy
Issue
Briefs**



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Plummeting prices in the dairy industry are creating critical cash-flow and long-term survivability issues on Ohio's 3,328 dairy farms. Cost-cutting decisions must be made with full awareness of both short and long-term production and economic consequences. OSU Extension's Dairy Working Group, a collaboration of OSU Extension Educators and Specialists discuss:

Reducing costs to improve short term cash flow

Should I wean calves earlier?

The answer to this question depends on your answers to 3 more questions:

- 1) When do you wean calves now?
- 2) What is your target rate of gain?
- 3) How good is your calf manager?

The 2007 NAHMS Dairy Survey found that 33% of heifer calves are weaned at 8 weeks of age, and another 25% between 8 and 13+ weeks. If you fall into either of these categories, weaning earlier could save you money. If you are part of the 25% that already weans at 6 weeks of age, weaning a week earlier will save you less than \$2 per calf in feed costs.

If your answer to (1) was 7 weeks or more, and you are feeding for a pound or more of gain per day, you have some opportunity to save a few dollars.

Using late March prices of 92¢/lb for 20:20 milk replacer (MR) powder and 25¢/lb for a 20% CP calf starter, a calf fed for a pound of gain per day using 1.6 pounds of MR powder per day will eat \$10.30 worth of MR per week. She will also eat between \$1 and \$2 worth of starter grain. If she was weaned, she would consume about 4 pounds of starter per day (no, not the first few days after weaning), which would cost about a dollar per day or \$7 per week. Savings will be between \$3 and \$4 per calf for a one-week-earlier weaning.

If your target rate of gain is 1.5 pounds per day, for each week the calf is weaned earlier than normal, savings would average about \$8 per calf.

If targeted gain is a half pound or less per day, weaning earlier will not result in large savings. Feeding one pound of the 20:20 MR powder per day costs \$6.44 per week plus \$1 to \$2 of starter per week results in a total feed cost between \$7.44 and \$8.44 per week. The weaned calf will eat about \$6.12 of starter (the

smaller weaned calf will consume less starter than calves fed for a higher rate of gain). Potential savings range from \$1.30 to \$2.30 per calf for a one-week-earlier weaning.



Bottom Line: Calves can be successfully weaned at 5 or 6 weeks of age, but need excellent management to maintain growth and health both pre- and post weaning. Weaning a week earlier will not save much money at lower levels of milk replacer feeding. At higher rates of feeding, savings could be worthwhile if calves are currently fed milk replacer for 8 or more weeks.

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