



First by a nose — weaning made easy

Weighing it up: New England cattle producer Chris Wright weans about 250 calves each year using nose rings, with consistent weight gains about 0.6kg per day over the 13-day weaning period.

Photo: EasyWean

Traditional weaning practices often result in stress and weight loss, broken infrastructure and a considerable amount of time and money spent supplementary feeding and handling. **Pamela Lawson** looks at the potential benefits and problems when using spiked nose rings to wean calves

There is an increasing awareness by livestock producers of the benefits of intensive, rotational grazing and keeping livestock in a single mob.

But traditional weaning methods have necessitated the calves being separated from the cows and run as a separate mob for a considerable time.

Which often results in significant animal stress and weight loss (or at least the cessation of weight gain), excessive noise, broken fences and infrastructure, compacted fence lines and the need to supplementary feed and monitor calves during the weaning process.

In 1999, NSW grazier Brian Marshall introduced an alternative weaning process to Australian cattle producers.

The method, developed by Dick and Judy Richardson in South Africa, uses a plastic, spiked EasyWean nose ring fitted to the calves at weaning.

Brian has used the nose rings to wean his own herd since 1999, and while some design improvements have been made, he continues to use the original versions to test longevity.

Many nose rings have now been used for more than 10 weanings and are still going strong.

Why use them?

Using the nose rings to wean calves from their mother greatly alleviates the stress

traditionally associated with separating young animals from their dam.

Instead, the offspring continue to run with their mothers, continuing to maintain or gain weight assuming adequate feed is available to the mob.

The nose rings are designed to not restrict the calf from grazing or drinking water in any way.

By keeping the animals in a single mob, the calves continue to interact socially with the herd as a whole and can be taught imprinted behaviours such as respect for electric tape.

Fewer mobs also allow longer plant recovery periods and more feed to be grown in planned-grazing situations.

A small trial by Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry researchers in 2008 showed calves with a nose ring and kept in the main breeder mob grew at an average of 0.82kg per day for the 14 days over which they were weaned.

The nose rings were then removed, although well before the minimum four weeks recommended by the manufacturer, as almost 90 per cent of the cows were no longer being suckled.

The calves were then removed from the breeder group and transported to a store paddock to grow out.

Over the next 10-day period they lost almost all the weight they had gained

At a glance...

- ▶ Using spiked nose rings to wean calves maintains the maternal link, reduces stress and allows rotationally-grazed mobs to be kept together
- ▶ Trials and producer experience show the cost of nose ring weaning to be considerably less than yard weaning
- ▶ Trials and on-farm experiences have shown nose ring-weaned calves continue to gain weight during the weaning process, given adequate nutrition
- ▶ Rings can occasionally be lost or ineffective, but at least 90 per cent of the herd will usually be weaned after 4-6 weeks

during weaning, suggesting they still suffered social stress when removed from their dams.

A contemporary group of yard-weaned calves initially lost weight when weaned, but when moved to the store paddock to join the nose ring weaners, they steadily gained weight so both groups ended up at about the same weight by day 24 of the trial (see Figure 1).

Cattle weaned using nose rings may still require yarding and handling at a later date once weaned.

This can be used to improve behaviour in the yards, help them learn to eat and drink in the yards and develop immunity to infections such as pestivirus if a vaccination is not used.

How it works

Once fitted with the nose ring, calves are less able to access their dam's teat as the nose ring flops around in front of its mouth.

The cow is also made uncomfortable by the calf's persistent attempts to suckle, and the spikes cause her to move away from the calf.

As a result, lactation is suppressed.

While the spikes look aggressive, the manufacturers have not experienced any cases where a nose ring has caused udder damage to a cow.

The manufacturers suggest the nose ring should be left on calves for 4–6 weeks to ensure lactation has ceased.

This should result in an effective weaning of at least 90 per cent of calves, allowing for some lost nose rings (about 5–10 per cent) and some cows to put up with the discomfort and allow their calf to keep suckling.

EasyWean sheep/goat nose rings are now available for the weaning of lambs and kids.

Cost considerations

The Northern Territory DPI researchers also compared the costs associated with yard weaning and nose ring weaning in their 2008 trials.

A number of assumptions were made, including the staff and feed costs being significantly higher for the five days of yard weaning than to apply and remove the nose rings, the nose rings being repeatedly re-used to reduce cost and an opportunity cost resulting from 10 per cent of the nose rings being 'ineffective'.

This study concluded the nose ring weaning would be about half the cost of yard weaning, but would result in the production of less-educated weaners.

From the manufacturer's website, the current price of an EasyWean nose ring ranges from \$7.40 to \$8.25 (GST inclusive) depending on the number of nose rings ordered.

The website also gives an indication of likely postage costs, but these may be subject to change.

The nuts and bolts

According to the manufacturers, fitting a nose ring to a calf is simply a matter of restraining the calf in the head bail, pushing one nose ring lug into a nostril, flipping the nose across with your finger and allowing the other lug to fall into the other nostril.

The wing nut is then adjusted to tighten the nose ring, allowing minimal movement.

An operator should be able to fit a nose ring to a calf in well under a minute once they become familiar with the technique.

The retention rate of the nose rings is almost entirely determined by how well they are applied.

Occasionally, if the lugs are done up too tightly, they will penetrate the septum

(dividing membrane) between calf's nostrils, making removal more difficult.

To remove the rings, the calf is again restrained, the wing nut loosened and the ring removed by gently pulling back on each lug.

The manufacturers suggest a glove is worn on the off (or left) hand to give the operator confidence to grab the spikes while undoing the wing nut, reducing the chance of catching or scratching a finger in the nose ring.

Once removed, the nose rings should be immediately placed in a bucket of water, before being later soaked in detergent, scrubbed with an old brush, rinsed and dried.

The bolt, washer and wing nut are all stainless steel, but a light application of oil should be used to lubricate bolt and nut before storage, to prevent corrosion.

Producer experiences

Since 2004, Chris Wright from the New England region of northern NSW has used EasyWean nose rings on about 250 calves each year.

"We initially conducted a trial on 180 calves and weaned another 20 by traditional forced separation," Chris said.

"We weighed the calves before and after the trial and found on average, those

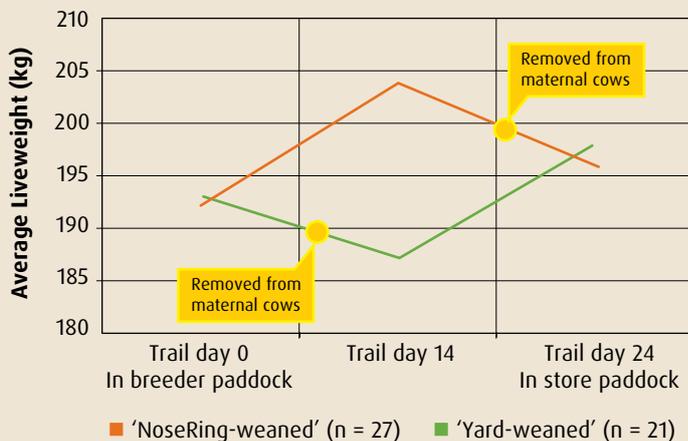


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FIGURE 1 Weight changes for nose ring-weaned and yard-weaned calves



Source: Northern Territory DPI



with nose rings gained weight during weaning while those without rings lost about 20kg," he said.

"This was enough to convince us to wean using nose rings, although there were obviously other benefits such as lower weaning costs, increased productivity from keeping our rotationally-grazed herd in one mob and no environmental damage by fence-patrolling cattle.

Keep the link

"I believe the critical factor behind the success of using a nose ring weaning system is the process does not break the maternal link between the cow and calf and therefore does not create enormous distress in a highly social animal.

"Nor does this system thrust the calf onto a new diet at the height of its distress as yard weaning does.

"By the time we wean at about nine months of age, most calves are still suckling out of habit rather than necessity.

"The rings just quietly break this habit, allowing the cows to immediately begin to increase bodyweight because they no longer have to produce milk and they aren't suffering the stress which goes with losing their calves.

"While the design of the rings means there is the potential for the spikes to

make it uncomfortable for the mother when the calf tries to suckle, from my observations the rings work most effectively by preventing the calf getting its tongue around the teat.

Still gaining

"More recent weight trials show our calves are definitely still gaining weight during weaning.

"In 2010, we weaned in mid-May for 13 days.

"We put the nose rings on the calves when the herd passed the yards, and the calves weighed an average 301kg curfew weight.

"When we took the rings out 13 days later, the calves weighed an average 309kg, translating to a 0.64kg daily weight gain.

"These sort of results have been consistent for the past few years now, with the calves' weight gain ranging from 0.5-0.75kg/day during weaning.

"These days we only leave the nose rings in the steer calves for 10-14 days.

"While this is much less than recommended by the manufacturer, we find it is enough to remove the calves' dependence on their mother before they are sold on to a backgrounder.

"The same backgrounder has been buying our calves for the past four years, saying he finds them exceptionally quiet to handle.

"He comes and inducts the calves in our yards as we take the nose rings out, before trucking them to his property where he says he is able to virtually let them straight into the paddock to graze.

"We tend to leave the nose rings on our weaner heifers we are keeping as replacements for about three weeks, as they remain part of the main mob.

"This ensures they are fully weaned but does not risk penetrating the septum.

Counting costs

"At a cost of about \$8 per nose ring, I realise this upfront cost could seem prohibitive to some producers.

"But when you amortise the cost over the life of a ring, it comes down to potentially less than one dollar per ring.

"With good application technique they become even more cost-effective, as we have only lost two nose rings in recent years.

"We also find the whole weaning process considerably cheaper than yard weaning.

"These days it takes just two of us to pregnancy test 280 breeders and put nose rings in about 250 weaners in one day, and there is no supplementary feeding required.

"Some of the figures I've seen for yard weaning put the costs somewhere between \$14 and \$20 per head, and I don't know of anyone yard weaning whose calves gain weight during the process — usually it is the opposite."

Southern counterparts

A number of cattle producers in southern NSW have also recently trialled nose ring weaning, with similar weight gain results.

The general consensus from these small on-farm trials was if the cows and nose ringed calves were run on good quality pasture, the weight gain nearly doubled compared to calves yard weaned and then run on similar pasture.

But producers who use weaning as an opportunity to start running their cows on lighter country may have to rethink this strategy they are if using the nose rings to wean and they want to maintain weight gain in the calves. **FA**

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African technique works just as well here

Dick Richardson first began using nose rings to wean calves almost 20 years ago, when weaning about 500 calves each year in his home country of South Africa

Since coming to Australia three years ago, he has been using nose rings to wean the calves of both the 700 Shorthorn breeders he manages and the 150 or so traders he owns.

Tried and tested

"My own cattle are weaned over long periods as some of them are traders and we aim to turn off calves at 10 months of age," Dick said.

"But the Shorthorns are weaned in a much more routine manner.

"We put the nose rings in when the calves are eight months of age and leave them on their mothers for one week.

"We then draft them off their mothers and walk them away with the few pregnancy-tested empty cows to another block about 12km away, where we remove the nose rings.

"When I first used nose rings in South Africa, I used to put them in for four weeks.

"I later learnt by accident that putting the nose rings on for as little as four days was actually long enough to wean the calves, and the shorter timeframe meant there were fewer problems with calves continuing to try and suckle.

"So now we use the nose rings for just one week to wean our calves.

"This also solves the only problem we have ever had using nose rings, and that is rings growing into the nose if left in too long.

Fast and easy

"This quick, stress-free weaning method saves us a lot of work and time compared to the traditional yard weaning used for the Shorthorns previously.

Case study

Farm information

Name

Dick Richardson

Properties owned/managed

Manager of 'Morgan Pastoral Company' and owner of Springvalley

Location

Boorowa and Frogmore, NSW

Property sizes

2200ha and 750ha

Annual rainfall

600mm

Enterprises

Shorthorn cattle and Dorper sheep, and mixed cattle operation



"These days we use three people to draft off the 700 calves and fit them with nose rings, which takes about 5.5 hours.

"It takes about the same amount of time to remove the nose rings, but this is still far less time and labour than feeding the calves would take in the yards in the old days.

"We have found the average growth on the calves is 400g per day through the weaning process, with no broken fences and no bawling.

"I wouldn't do it any other way."



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Photo: EasyWean