


# MESSENGER-INQUIRER

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## Farm Update

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AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES  
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### **Two Productivity Measures for Cow-calf Farmers**

Dr. Kenny Burdine, Extension Beef Cattle Marketing Specialist at the University of Kentucky, wrote the following article about two very important indicators of production and profit in beef cattle. Weaning rate and weaning weight are critical to beef cattle farm profitability.

In December, most spring-calving cow-calf operations have weaned calves and have an opportunity to assess the productivity and profitability of their herds. To that end, I wanted to review two measures that are of utmost importance to a cow-calf operator. Neither measure carries a dollar sign, but both have serious implications for the revenue side of the profit equation. There is no shortage of financial measures that are helpful for cow-calf operators, but weaning rate and pounds of weaned calf per cow are both very important and simple to understand and calculate.

Weaning rate is the percentage of cows exposed to a bull that wean a calf in a given year. If a farmer exposed 50 cows and weaned 45 calves, the weaning rate for that operation would be 90% (45 calves divided by 50 cows). There is a cost to maintaining and breeding cows whether they wean a calf or not, so limiting the number of cows that fail to wean a calf is crucial. Holding

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all other things constant, herds with higher weaning rates are more profitable than those with lower weaning rates. If weaning rate is an issue, farmers should work to determine the cause. Are cows failing to breed, cows losing calves, or are calves not surviving?

An easy way to think about weaning rate is that it converts revenue per calf to revenue per cow. For example, assume that an average calf is weaned at 550 lbs and is worth \$3.60 per lb. Then the value of each calf is \$1,980 at weaning. Using the 90% weaning rate example, the gross value at weaning of the 45 calves is \$89,100. That value divided by 50 total cows in the herd is \$1,782. A reduction of nearly \$200 in revenue potential per cow. A 90% weaning rate is considered good. What if issues such as poor body condition or bull soundness occur that push weaning rates lower to 80%? An 80% weaning rate of 50 cows is 40 weaned calves. That's \$79,200 using the figures above, or \$1,584 revenue per cow. That is a reduction of nearly \$400 in revenue potential per cow. The fact that weaning rate significantly impacts profit is simply undeniable.

The second measure that I wanted to briefly discuss is pounds of weaned calf per cow. Pounds of weaned calf per cow can be calculated by dividing the total number of weaned pounds by the number of cows exposed to a bull or by multiplying the average weaning weight for the operation by the weaning rate. I like to think of pounds of weaned calf per cow much like a yield measure for a crop operation – production per unit. Weaned pounds are the production level, and cows are the unit.

Increasing the percentage of cows that wean a calf each year and/or increasing the weaning weight of calves are two of the primary ways that cow-calf operations can see increased revenues, with calf price being an important third factor. This is not to say that a higher level of

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pounds of weaned calf per cow is always desirable because this measure does not incorporate any additional costs associated with higher weaning weights or other considerations of the operation.

If you have a cow with an excellent weaning history go open one year or lose a calf, or wean a small calf, the first question to ponder is “what did I do wrong?” If you addressed the mistakes you made or determined the cause, give her a second chance. If it happens again, it’s time to consider replacement.

To get the information needed to make those decisions, records are required. Record calving records, and weigh the calves if possible. Keep track of this data year to year. Yes, it requires time above and beyond the day-to-day chores, but it will pay dividends. Increasing weaning rate and weaning weight are the keys to increasing gross revenue in your beef cattle enterprises.

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