



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet G6 - Easy weaning systems for farmed animals - Update August 2005

At FAI we are interested in providing animals with the things that are important to them. The weaning of farm animals is an area where we potentially can cause great stress to both dam and offspring which leads to commercial losses through subsequent disease. The way in which we manage this process is the subject of considerable development work at FAI which puts science into practice.

'the facts.....'

When weaning takes place there are various stressors which can come into play:

1. The physical separation of dam and offspring which is stressful to both.
2. A substantial change in diet depending upon the age at weaning and the quality of the subsequent diet - stressful to the offspring.
3. The sudden removal of the offspring which is drawing milk from the dam which can cause pain via an overstocked udder and increase the risk of mastitis. Factors to consider are the age of the offspring and the amount of milk being taken.
4. The above are often accompanied by a change of environment i.e. new housing or new field which is likely to be most stressful to the offspring as the environment will be unknown.

Examples in common practice are;

Weaning of animals before the natural weaning age;

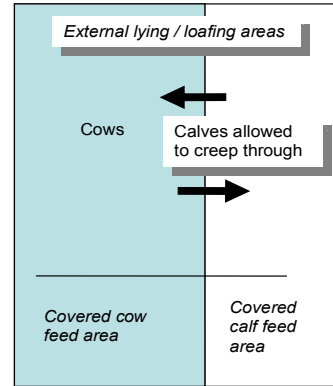
- Pigs 3-4 weeks compared to 8-12 weeks¹
- Dairy calves 1-4 days compared to about a year²

The above are most commonly accompanied by a change of environment for the offspring as movement to a clean environment is considered primary.

When the decision is made to wean the debate is whether it is more stressful to abrupt wean than to allow contact but no suckling. Abrupt weaning means complete separation in terms of sight, sound and contact. Marian Dawkins' latest definition of good animal welfare has proven helpful in making these decisions i.e. good welfare is about providing animals with what keeps them healthy and also what they want.³

This definition highlights that practicalities such as cows damaging themselves in an attempt to get back to their calves and lambs pacing along fences and developing scald must be considered. At FAI we have developed different approaches for various species.

Diagrammatic representation of the easy-wean system in use at FAI for suckler cows and their calves.



'.... the FAI response!'

We have addressed weaning in all three mammalian species on site:

Pigs - piglets are weaned at 6 weeks minimum and this coincides with a natural drop in milk production in the sow although it is sooner than natural weaning. Piglets are given access to the sow diet which is similar to the weaner diet from birth. This allows the gut to develop and enables a smooth transition at weaning. Post weaning losses are minimal. At weaning the sows are removed from the piglets which allows them to continue to use the resources they are used to i.e. feeders, drinkers and bedded area.

Sheep - these are weaned at 4-5 months and although sooner than natural weaning this allows full rumen development and thus there is less reliance on the dams milk. The ewes are removed from their lambs after about a week on clean pasture with their lambs which allows lambs to continue using the resources they have been shown by their dams i.e. shelter, water and feed. Stocking densities are low and faecal samples are taken regularly (see TDS S2) to provide parasitic information.

Sucklers - Calves are weaned at 7 months. FAI operate an 'easy-wean' system indoors which attracts the calf into a creep area through the provision of feed; when all the calves are consuming the new diet the creep gates are shut. The cows remain in the adjacent yard allowing comfort contact through the fence but preventing suckling for a few days before final weaning.

1 Stolba & Woodgush (1989) The behaviour of pigs in a semi-natural environment. *Anim. Prod.* 48, 419-25

2 FlowerFC, Weary DM *Animal Welfare* 2003, 12:3, 339-348

3 Marian Dawkins *Animal Welfare* Volume 13 Supplement February 2004



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