**Weaning Foals**

**Stephanie Wood, Senior Equine Technologist, CAFRE**

Plans should be put in place for the weaning of foals over the forthcoming weeks. Plans should ensure that weaning is carried out using a method which will maintain the health and safety of humans and horses and which minimises stress on the mare and foal. Foals in particular are prone to high levels of stress during weaning which can have detrimental effects on their health, growth rate and development.

To reduce negative effects of weaning it is important to prepare the foal for life independent of its dam. This preparation should include appropriate regular handling, social interaction with other horses and access to suitable solid feed. After three months of age foals should be eating appropriate quantities of creep feed or stud balancer suitable for foals. Creep feeds support maintenance of body condition as they contain higher levels of energy compared to stud balancers, making them suitable for foals who are not receiving adequate nutrition from milk intake alone. Stud balancers also supply essential nutrients but they are lower in calories making them suitable for foals in good body condition and with correct growth rate. Whichever feed is selected it should be fed at the manufacturers recommended amount to ensure correct nutrient intake. Following recommendations requires knowledge of the foal’s body weight, calculation of the daily requirement and accurate weighing of the actual feed.

*For example:*

*A common brand of Creep Pellets should be fed at a rate of 800g per 100kg of foal body weight per day, split into 3-4 meals throughout the day, compared to the same brand Stud Balancer which should be fed at 350g per 100kg body weight per day, again split between multiple feeds throughout the day*.

Feed selection and exact quantities required will however depend on a range of factors including the anticipated mature body weight for the animal, body condition, growth rate, health status of the foal and availability of grazing and/or forage.

At CAFRE, Enniskillen Campus, foals are weaned whilst still at grass. Mares and foals are put in a securely fenced field close to the yard to enable high levels of supervision to be provided. One mare at a time is removed from the group of mares and foals, generally over the course of a week to ten days. The group is allowed to settle down before the next mare is taken away. The mare with the calmest temperament is the last one to be removed from the foals. Mares and foals are monitored closely. After the mare has been removed from the foal her udder is checked regularly to ensure that the milk supply is drying off and that there are no signs of infection. Mares are put initially into a closely grazed, well fenced paddock which is not in close proximity to the field of foals. Mares remain in the bare paddock until their milk supply has dried off and until they appear to be settled. Foals continue to get fed at grass.

At the end of September, after students have returned to the Campus, foals are caught daily and are regularly handled. This handling includes leading in hand, grooming and picking up their feet. When weather and ground conditions deteriorate foals are housed at night initially and are turned out during the day. This helps the foal to adapt to the stable environment and to a forage diet which is fed to the stock retained during the autumn and winter months. Preparation then begins for the Thoroughbred foals being aimed at the sales.