

Technical Bulletin



Getting More From Forage Creep Feeding

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Why Creep Feed?

Increase Calf Weaning Weight. Creep feeding bridges the nutrition gap that occurs when the calf does not get enough nutrients from milk or forage to maximize its full growth potential. For many ranches, this gap often occurs in late summer when both cow milk production and forage quality are on the decline.

Reduce Stress of Weaning. Creep-feeding helps calves become accustomed to eating from a feeder. At weaning, they are more likely to go to the bunk, begin eating sooner, and take in essential nutrients that help them to withstand stress and stay healthy.

Improve Feedlot Performance. Getting calves to the bunk sooner usually means better overall performance on grow and finish programs. Not only are creep-fed calves more likely to stay healthy, but are also more likely to reach desired gains with fewer days on feed and lower overall feeding costs. When calves are taken to harvest, creep-fed calves also tend to have higher carcass quality.

When Would I Most Likely Creep Feed?

- When I can get paid for additional calf weight gain.
- When I have calves with high growth potential.
- When I am short of grass but must continue to manage pairs.
- When I want to early wean to better manage cows and calves.
- When I want to easily transition calves to a feeding program.

Are There Times When I Might Not Creep Feed?

- When I want to better measure individual cow performance.
- When I think my replacement heifers will get too fat.
- When I can't properly manage a creep feeding program.

Are All Creep Feeds Alike?

No, there are two basic types of creep feeds—protein and energy. Each type will also vary in performance according to their sources of protein or their sources of energy.

Protein Creeps These are fed when there is plenty of forage, but it is of low quality. This situation usually occurs in mid to late summer, when forages are maturing and declining in protein and other digestible nutrients. At this same time, calves are getting bigger and forage is making up a larger part of their diet.

In a protein creep, a protein concentrate in meal, block or tub form is self fed to increase both the digestibility and intake of forage. The expected response is an increase in total digestible nutrients (TDN) and weight gain. The response will vary according to calf weight and forage quality, as well as the level and sources of protein in the supplement. Protein concentrates (>30% CP) made up of high quality multiple-source proteins produce the most cost effective response. They have lower intakes and provide a slower and more continuous release of nitrogen for use by rumen microbes than moderate-level (20-30%CP) single-source proteins.

A good example of a protein concentrate that can be used in a creep feeding program is MoorMan's Mintrate Blocks. These blocks have a crude protein level of 38-42% which is provided by a blend of natural oil meal proteins. The blocks are available in different degrees of hardness which provide stepwise intake control. Average supplement intake for 5-weight calves is about half a pound per head per day. Feed-to-gain conversion is just under 1 to 1. Current calf and feed prices produce a return-on-investment that is over 2 to 1.

Other good candidates for a self-fed protein creep are MoorMan's Roughage Buster 60 Meal and Westfeeds AgriLyx 20% AN Calf Weaner Tub.

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Energy Creeps. This type of creep is usually fed as a substitute for forage. It may be fed to enable higher stocking rates, stretch a forage resource, or sustain calf weight gains when forage is lacking (e.g. drought). Energy creeps are also fed when there is plenty of good quality forage, but the desired weight gain is more than what the forage is expected to support.

Intake of energy creeps will vary widely. Intake will be effected by forage quality, cow milking ability, size of calves, number of feeders per head, placement of feeders, feeder flow rate, feed additives, as well as the availability of additional salt or mineral. When creep feeding for extended periods (over 75 days), controlling intake can be very important to minimizing digestive upset problems and achieving cost-effective gains.

When energy is provided to cattle on forage, the response will vary according to forage quality and the source of energy. Energy feeds with higher protein and higher digestible fiber are more complimentary to forage digestion in the rumen. They produce a better gain response than feeds that are lower in declines. Highly digestible fiber feeds also produce less risk of digestive upset than traditional grain-based feeds.

Feed to gain conversions also vary according to feed type. Higher protein, higher digestible fiber creeps typically have better feed-to-grain ratios (e.g. 5 or 6 to 1) than traditional grain-based creeps (e.g. 10 to 1). Thus to compare costs of creep feeding programs, one must consider pounds of feed required per pound of grain produced. Using the typical ratios shown above, a traditional grain-based creep must sell for almost half the price of a higher protein, higher digestible fiber creep in order to produce the same return on investment.

A good example of a high-protein, high-digestible fiber creep is Westfeeds Body Builder 16 Calf Creep. Energy and protein comes from wheat midds, soy hulls, and canola meal. It is also highly fortified with essential trace minerals and vitamin A, D, and E and made with a variety of medication options. Intake is usually around 1 lb per 100 pounds of body weight, with feed conversions of approximately 5 to 1.

Another option for cost-effective feeding is Westfeeds Prairie 15 Calf Creep. Energy and protein comes from wheat midds. It is fortified with essential trace minerals and Vitamin A and can be medicated. Intake will be a little over 1 lb per 100 pounds of body weight, with feed conversions of approximately 7 to 1.

Summary

Creep feeding can help increase calf weaning weights, reduce the stress of weaning, and improve calf performance in the feedlot. Depending on forage availability and quality, creep supplements can either help improve forage digestibility and intake, or help stretch limited forage resources. To make best use of forage and realize the benefits of creep feeding, producers must select among different types of creep feeds that can carry in performance according to sources of protein and/or energy.



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