To Creep or not to Creep

We pose the question

Angus breeders blow hot and cold on the subject. Some have saved their bacon with it. Others have tried and discarded the effort.

Creep feeding is not a simple subject. There are those environments, climatic emergencies, or market opportunities where it becomes attractive. Conversely, there are breeders who would never feel comfortable with the practice, preferring nature deal the hand while the breeder applies other management tools to make up for nutritional deficiencies if possible.

Here's experience from four respected breeders who also represent some geographic variety. Our panel was offered a pro or con position based on these points for each:

PRO . . .

1. Creeping can allow calf to achieve genetic potential regardless of mom's milking ability and the environment.
2. Can add significant extra pounds as weaning approaches . . . perhaps a compensatory gain effort.
3. Enables calf to better withstand stress when weaned.
4. Calves go on feed and gain better if creeped and bunk-broke.
5. Calves not creeped compete unfairly with calves that are creeped.
6. Creep-fed heifers should breed earlier.
7. Creeping enforces better management of cowherd and calf crop.

CON . . .

1. Creeping masks true milking ability of the cowherd.
2. It conditions calves to expect better than what they might be exposed to in later productive life. It compromises their ability to cope with sparse or substandard grazing conditions.
3. Creeping can add significant costs in feed and labor.
4. Creeping heifers risks depositing fat in the mammary glands, compromising future milk production.

Our panelists are: *Dave Pingrey, Black Bull Cattle Co., Benton, Miss. . . . Dave Nichols, Nichols Farms, Anita, Iowa. . . Carol Thompson, Deep Creek Angus Ranch, Potlatch, Idaho . . . and Doug Hoff, Scotch Cap Angus Ranch, Bison, S.D.*

Our **"PRO"** *position is shared by Dave Nichols and Mrs. Thompson. Dave Pingrey takes the* **"CON"** *platform, and, Doug Hoff relates some experience of a summary nature, highlighting both good and bad results.*

To a degree, a discussion of creep feeding invites the time-worn "cop-out"— all depends on your situation." Yet, given just the sample of experience and practices presented here, perhaps that's the most conclusive statement that can be made.

If you're philosophically and pyschologically opposed to it, no amount of economic or environmental justification will sit comfortably. If you approve the practice, then your management will have to be geared to ward off its excesses or drawbacks.

Con . . . Dave Pingrey

Mr. Pingrey agrees creeping masks milking ability. He suggests it will be necessary to "disregard milk EPD's on cows from herds that creep feed."

Setting a better table through creeping does "set up" a group of calves to fall down when the grazing becomes spartan-"makes them into what my grandfather used to call 'hard-doers.' "

In addition, Mr. Pingrey says: "Creep-fed heifers are less likely to milk to their genetic potential due to early fat deposits in the udder. In addition, few commercial producers creep feed." He believes production systems of both purebred and commercial producers should be as nearly parallel as possible to maintain credibility, especially when analyzing performance information.

"In times when weather causes nutritional catastrophes, give the supplemental feed to the cows, not the calves. That way the production profile of the cowherd is maintained. Creep feeding penalizes the honest cow and subsidizes the cheater."

Pro . . . Carol Thompson

"I would have to take the 'pro' position on creeping. I feel that a moderate amount of creep as the calf starts to put a great demand on the cow will benefit the calf, cow, and also the owner in the end-result.

"It helps the calf to adjust to feed when it is weaned and lowers the stress, meaning less pounds lost at weaning time. It also gives the calves a little more weight to start into the bad winter months, and I believe, there's less sickness due to good flesh with the right amount of minerals and moderate creep feed.

"I prefer a very strong ration of oats for growing out the calf and not putting on a lot of excessive fat. Taking some of the demand off the cow in August, September, and October when the grass gets dry by creeping also helps your cows to better prepare for the winter and the new calf.

"I do not favor excessive creep, however. Natural protein and oats and when possible, *not* **free choice, so you can limit the amount of intake and not get the heifer calves in too good of flesh. Separating the heifers from the bull calves and feeding a little different ration helps keep the heifer calves from getting too fleshy."**

Pro . . . Dave Nichols

"The genetic implications of creep feeding are largely emotional. Our experiences and research indicate little effect on selection for either growth or milk, *if all calves are treated the same and remain in contemporary groups.* **With or without creep, cows still rank the same in the herd, relative to milk and growth, though the range may be narrower when calves are creep fed.**

"Here at Nichols Farms, we creep our calves from 30 to 60 days prior to weaning. We consider this a management decision to better utilize our forage. In Iowa, we do not have the benefit of hard grass. Our average frost date is October 2. This means our pastures have a hard time supporting a cow and her calf that is approaching 600 pounds during the September-October period prior to cornstalks and crop residues.

It makes economic sense to supplement the calf rather than feed the whole family.

"In our operation, the cow is already bred because we limit our entire cowherd to an annual 63-day calving season. Our creep ration is home-grown grains consisting of 50 percent whole oats, 41 percent shelled corn, and nine percent all-natural supplement by weight. This ration is moderate in both energy and fiber.

"At Nichols Farms, all the creeps (portable self-feeders) go out to all the calves within three days. In some instances where there are major differences in amount and quality of pastures, the use of creep may in fact make the contemporary groups more equal, which would make for more sound genetic selection and data.

"A university study of our herd indicated no problems with creep feeding affecting the subsequent milk production of heifer replacements. Several studies have indicated adverse effects, but in our herd there have been no sawtooth effects from either heavy-milking cows or creep feeding.

"With EPD's taking the commercial industry by storm, I suspect the value of actual weaning weight, adjusted wean ing weight, and weaning weight ratios are going to diminish even further as indicators of value to commercial men. The handwriting is on the wall. We in the seedstock industry are going to be selling genetic inputs for calving ease, maternal milk, and early growth, not 51-inch tall, 802-pound calves at 212 days with no creep."

Mixed . . . Doug Hoff

"I've had some experience, both good and bad, with creep feeding and would be glad to share my thoughts on this subject.

"A few years ago, we had an extremely dry spring and summer (quite common for our area). We decided to try creep feeding our calves with whole oats but removed the feeders about two and one-half months later when we discovered two calves dead from bloat.

"The following year we tried creep feeding again only to have the same thing happen. I really don't know why we had such poor luck, but maybe our pastures are too large for creeping. The calves get away from the creep for a day or two, and then they 'tank up' when they find it again. Anyway, we quit creep feeding until two years ago when l decided to make a 'compromise.' We put the feeders out approximately 40 to 50 days before weaning with excellent results.

"First of all, we had no death loss, probably because the calves weren't on the creep long enough to become 'hogs.' Secondly, even though the feed was out only a short time, nearly all the calves had become accustomed to eating we!! enough that when we weaned the calves, they started eating right away. This meant less stress, fewer sick calves, and better gains (our feed test begins the day we wean, with our weaning weight used as the on-test weight).

"Also, I don't think that any single calf had eaten enough creep to significantly affect our weaning records. I might add that we only did this with our bull calves and that I really can't see any advantage in creeping the heifers. It may even be a disadvantage since heifers tend to breed better when they're 'on the gain' and we'd rather not have them too fleshy.

"In summation, I'd have to say that extended creep feeding doesn't work for us, but since we wean later and only have a short period of time to get our calves in shape for our bull sale, it is nice to have the calves eating the day we wean. Also, the compensatory growth experienced by the calves probably makes up for the feed they missed during the summer."