



Considering Creep-feeding?

Here are a dozen dos and don'ts.

by *Kindra Gordon, field editor*

Would you like to see a smoother and healthier transition of calves from weaning to going on feed, as well as boost calf weaning weights by 70 to 100 pounds (lb.)? What about keeping your cows in better body condition going into fall and postweaning — and leaving more grass in your pastures?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, creep-feeding calves prior to weaning may merit consideration for your operation, according to Dustin Elkins, a nutrition consultant for CHS. Elkins works from Richardton, N.D., and says that particularly in drought years when pasture conditions begin to wane in late summer, creep-feeding can be beneficial to calves, cows and pastures.

“It’s about \$60 per head to creep-feed for four to eight weeks prior to weaning, and

studies have shown calves will put on 70 to 100 pounds,” he says.

However, that creep-feeding is not just about the extra calf pounds, there is also value from reducing forage use by the calves and lessening lactation needs from cows so they can maintain body condition.

He cites one study that found calves on creep feed consume 38% less forage. Additionally, Elkins notes that calves that have been on creep feed know how to go to the bunk and eat once they are weaned. Because of the extra nutrition they’ve had from creep feed, these calves tend to have stronger immune systems and better rumen function postweaning.

“It’s a seamless transition to the feedlot,” says Elkins.

Additionally, Elkins notes that with the weight boost to calves from creep-feeding,

their harvest date can be moved up, which may help capture better market prices. He gives the example of calves that would normally be harvested in June may achieve an April harvest date — a time when calf prices tend to be \$10-\$12 per hundredweight (cwt.) higher.

From the perspective of the cow, creep-feeding calves means lower lactation and maintenance requirements for the cow. This helps her maintain better body condition going into fall and winter, which can mean better nutrition for the fetus she’s carrying and better breed-back results after calving, Elkins explains.

Dos and don'ts

With those benefits in mind, if you decide to give creep-feeding the green light, Elkins shares this list of management tips for an effective creep-feeding program:

1. Consider feeder placement. Elkins suggests initially placing feeders where cattle congregate (such as near a water source) so calves will begin to use them and get accustomed to them. You may need to spill some feed on the ground to encourage calves to move inside the creep feeder. Once the calves’ feed intake increases, Elkins says the feeders should be moved farther out into pastures. This ensures the cattle will continue to eat some forage, as well as get out and walk for exercise. It will also foster increased pasture utilization.

2. Plan for one 8-foot (ft.) creep feeder for every 50-75 head, Elkins recommends.

3. Place mineral feeders near the creep feeders. This will help attract the cows and draw the calves to more remote areas of the pasture, says Elkins.

4. Locate creep feeders where they can easily be serviced and refilled with a feedtruck. He advises avoiding low spots that can get muddy or be flooded. Avoid windy hilltops where a feeder could be blown over.

5. Clean feeders after every rain. Otherwise, pellets can become mushy, which attracts flies and ruins some of the feed, shares Elkins.

6. Keep the feed gates open to about two finger widths, Elkins suggests. This reduces feed building up in the trough and being wasted. If you can put your whole fist under the feed gate, or if calves are dragging out more feed than you want, set the gate down further, Elkins says.

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7. Creep intake by calves should not exceed 1.5% of body weight, Elkins says. This means a 500-lb. calf should not eat more than 7.5 lb. of creep feed per day. If they do, it's time to move to fresh grass or to wean the calves, Elkins says.

8. Never let the feeder run empty, Elkins cautions. If the feeder is empty for a few days, once it is refilled calves may try to overeat, which is costly and can cause health issues.

9. Utilize a high-fiber, high-protein formulation. Elkins explains that this will complement the calf's forage diet

and also promote muscle growth. A high-starch formulation can cause issues with forage consumption and result in a negative associative effect in the rumen.

10. Consider feeding a creep feed that includes chelated copper, zinc and manganese, as well as an ionophore such as Bovatec® or Rumensin®. The mineral package can benefit overall calf health, while the ionophore is designed to enhance feed efficiency, limit overeating and prevent coccidiosis.

11. Don't move the creep feeder into the weaning corral. Elkins emphasizes that creep feed is developed for suckling calves on pasture; it's not intended to be a self-feeder in a corral. Different feed rations are available for weaned calves.

12. Don't leave empty feeders in the pasture year-round. Elkins says it is hard to get cows to move to feeders in the pasture with their calves in the future if they are accustomed to them sitting empty.

