Ridin' Herd

► by **Rick Rasby,** *University of Nebraska*

Creep-feeding calves this summer

The price of feeder calves is high because of the low cow inventory; there will likely be a lot of competition for calves this fall. Producers are contemplating whether creep-feeding might be economical this year as a management strategy. The primary objective of this management practice is to put additional weight on the calf before weaning without making the calves fleshy, especially if sold at weaning. The decision whether to creep-feed calves really boils down to if it can be accomplished economically to increase the profit potential for the cow-calf enterprise.

Types of creep feed

There are a number of creep rations that producers can consider. Most creep rations are high in energy and are typically about 16% crude protein. Data would suggest that high-energy creep rations will result in the greatest weight gain.

Creep-feeding research studies show a wide range of feed conversions, from 4:1 to 18:1 pounds (lb.) of creep per 1 lb. of calf gain. Calves gain about as fast as their genetic makeup will allow when there is an abundance of high-quality forage. Calf gain also depends on the milk output of the dam.

When creep feed is offered to calves, milk intake is usually not affected. There are no data to document that creep-feeding can be used to reduce nursing frequency and intensity on cows or young lactating females.

In general, calves will eat about 3.2 lb. per head daily (range 0 to 6.5 lb. per head per day, depending on length of the creep-feeding period) with a gain-to-feed ratio of 1 lb. gain to 6 lb. creep (range 1:4.2 to 1:10), and an increased average daily gain (ADG) of 0.3 lb. (range 0.15- to 0.65-lb. increase in ADG) compared to non-creep-fed calves.

Creep-grazing calves appears to be most beneficial when the forages cow-calf pairs are grazing are low in quantity or quality and high-quality creep forage can be grown more inexpensively than conventional creep feeds can be purchased. To implement creep-grazing, a producer could plant small pastures of high-quality forage adjacent to pastures grazed by cow-calf pairs. Forages well-suited for use in a creep-grazing system are high in forage quality and readily available.

Another option in a "cell-grazing" situation is to allow access of the next pasture in the rotation to the calves before allowing the cows access.

When creep-feeding calves, make sure only calves can have access to the creep feed. There have been situations when calves are offered creep feed, but the feeding structure does not keep small-framed cows from consuming the creep feed. This is costly.

When to creep-feed calves

There are data suggesting that creep-feeding has a positive effect on carcass quality. The effect of creep-feeding on carcass quality is influenced by the length of the creep-feeding period and type of creep feed fed. If calves are sold at weaning, creep-fed calves will be heavier than non-creep-fed calves; therefore, more calf weight can be sold.

The key is, can this management practice be accomplished economically and increase the profit potential of the cow-calf enterprise? When determining costs for creep-feeding, include feed costs, equipment (creep feeder, tractor and wagon with an auger to fill the feeder if not done by the creep supplier) and labor costs.

Fall-calving herds in the Midwest are challenged because of low nutrient quality of the forage resource when lactation occurs. The concern, in my opinion, is heifers to be selected as replacements and the challenge for them to have ample weight at weaning, and it may be difficult to develop them at a rate that a producer would be comfortable with to get them to reach puberty and cycle before the start of the breeding season. In this situation, creep-feeding may be warranted.

Value of the weight gain

As calf weight increases, the value of the weight gain is less on a dollar-per-pound or dollar-per-hundredweight (cwt.) basis. In other words, there is a price slide down for calves that weigh 500 lb. compared to calves that weigh 400 lb. This is important to understand because the added calf weight from creep-feeding cannot be priced at market value, but is something less than market price.

As an example, let's say the price for 500-lb. calves is $1.90 per lb. or $950 total, and there is a $15-per-cwt. price slide for a 600 pounder, or $1.75 per lb., making a 600-lb. calf worth $1,050 total. Therefore, the extra 100 lb. returns an extra $100 ($1,050 - $950). The value of each added pound was $1 per lb. ($100 ÷ 100 lb. = $1) and not $1.75 per lb.

If the cost of the creep feed were $25 per cwt. and a calf eats on average 4 lb. daily during a 90-day creep-feeding period, the calf will eat 360 lb. of creep feed. The cost of feed for the 90-day creep-feeding period is $90. In this scenario, the net return from creep-feeding is $10 ($100 income - $90 feed costs = $10) per calf.

Make sure all costs are included. The return from creep-feeding in the above scenario only includes the feed — no labor or equipment. Do the calculations with your numbers.

Final thoughts

To creep-feed calves or not is not an easy question to answer. When making decisions about supplementing nursing calves, take into account cost and availability of feed and forage options to creep-feed the calves, calf prices and calf marketing plans. The cost of creep supplementation depends on the cost of creep feed and calf feed conversion.

Advantages of creep-feeding include:

- ►it improves weaning weight and rate of gain of calves while nursing;
- ►it compensates for dams with low milk output;
- ►it provides calves that are trained to eat from a bunk; and
- ►it simplifies weaning and treatment of calves at weaning because they know how to eat out of a bunk.

Disadvantages of creep-feeding are:

- ►it may not be economical;
- ►if heifers become overly fat, it may reduce future milk production;
- ►it may result in fleshy calves at weaning that are discounted; and
- ►it may be difficult to accomplish in remote areas.

EMAIL: *rrasby@unlnotes.unl.edu*

Editor's Note: *Rick Rasby is a beef specialist with the University of Nebraska.*