

Creep-Feeding Calves

The need to creep feed calves is argued over with similar frequency to the age-old argument of which is better, Ford or Chevy? There are reasons to creep feed and there are reasons not to creep feed. Factors such as forage quality and quantity, cow body condition, calf nutrition and desired weaning weight, creep feed cost, and available labor and equipment should all be considered when deciding whether or not to creep feed calves nursing cows while they are nursing their mothers.

If forage quantity and/or quality is limited, energy creep feeds are recommended. Energy creep feeds are typically 14 to 18% crude protein and consumed at 3 to 8 lb per head daily. Energy creep feeds substitute for forage in the calves' diet leaving more forage available for the cows. Calves are like you and me, they like dessert best and vegetables least, thus they consume all the milk the dam has, they eat creep feed, and finally consume the forage.

Creep feeding takes some pressure off the cow after the calf reaches 5 to 6 months of age. During early lactation creep feeding allows the cow to have a better body condition by substituting for forage consumption by the calf, leaving more quality forage for the cow.

The calf needs protein and energy to grow. Actually, protein is first limiting for growth. If milk production is adequate, and forage quality and quantity is good, a small amount of protein creep is most economically and promotes higher weaning weights. A protein creep is 28 to 32% crude protein and fed at 1 pound daily until the calf weighs 300 lb and fed at 2 pound daily after the calf weighs 300 lb. The high protein creep program requires a creep paddock so all the calves can be hand-fed the creep daily or every other day. If forage is in short supply and /or quality, an energy creep (14-18% CP) substitutes for forage energy and protein to meet the calves nutrient needs for maximum growth.

Digestible fiber sources, such as soyhulls and beet pulp, are excellent feeds for a calf creep, especially in calves over 350 lb. Digestible fiber does not have a negative impact on forage fiber digestion like starch from grains does. Thus, heavier calves that are beginning to consume forage can digest the forage efficiently. Corn-based creep feeds may have more benefits in the young calf under 350 lb, than digestible fiber feeds. Corn is digested more completely in very immature ruminants. Too much moderately digested fiber (i.e. alfalfa meal), poorly digested fiber (i.e. cottonseed hulls), or indigestible fiber (i.e. rice hulls), reduces calf performance, sometimes severely.

Feeding an energy creep adds an additional 100 pounds to a calves' weaning weight. At 60 cents/lb of calf, this adds \$60 to the value of a calf. An energy creep at \$.10/lb and 500 lb/calf costs \$50/calf. Feeding a protein creep adds an additional 75-lb to the weaning weight of a calf. At 60 cents/lb of calf, this adds \$45 to the value of the calf. A protein creep at \$.15/lb and 150 lb/calf costs \$22.50/calf. Decisions to implement a creep program fall heavily on whether the additional weight gain and income outweigh the additional labor and equipment costs.