

# Creep Feeding Calves

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## WHAT IS CREEP FEEDING?

Creep feeding means to provide supplemental feed - grain, commercial rations or high quality roughages - to calves in a feeder or feeding area constructed so calves can enter but larger cattle cannot.

There is no simple yes or no answer to whether or not it pays to creep feed calves. The individual operation, production conditions, and marketing intentions should be considered when deciding whether to creep feed.

## WHY CREEP FEED?

- Creep-fed calves are heavier at weaning.
- Usually 30 to 60 pounds of added gain can be produced. It usually takes 8 to 12 pounds of grain per pound of added gain.

When trials from 15 research centers covering several years were averaged, creep-feeding spring calves gave a 49-pound boost to weaning weights. An average of 12 pounds of feed were required per pound of additional gain.

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74.3  
19  
78x  
A-332
- Creep-fed calves suffer less set-back at weaning time. They adapt to feedlot rations more readily and usually suffer less feedlot stress.
  - Several studies have shown that cows were 20 to 30 pounds heavier at weaning if calves were creeped. This added weight could result in a higher salvage value for cows culled, or slightly

improved condition for the wintered cows.

- In herds with inherently poor milkers, or large numbers of first calf heifers or aged cows, it will usually pay to creep feed.
- Calves dropped late in the season are likely to obtain more benefit from creep feeding than calves born early in the spring. By the time later-born calves are large enough to utilize grass the pasture has usually deteriorated considerably. It is usually more efficient to wean late-born calves and feed them separately rather than leave them on the cow after they have reached four months of age.
- Calves of above-average inherited growth potential will respond more to creep feeding. Likewise, bull calves will respond more to creep feeding than steer and heifer calves.

## CREEP FEEDING MAY NOT ALWAYS PAY

- Generally, it does not pay to creep feed calves to be wintered on a high fiber diet before going on summer pasture.
- The calf price-feed price ratio may not always be favorable.
- Calves will eat very little creep feed early in the season if pastures are good. Calves will usually start consuming creep feed in July.
- Non-creep-fed calves tend to catch up or compensate if well fed after weaning. Studies at Dickinson Experiment Station showed an

average of 24 pounds advantage in weaning weight for creep-fed calves, but this difference was reduced to little or nothing by the time the calves were ready for slaughter. If the producer plans to feed his own calves to slaughter weight, much of the benefit from creep feeding will be diluted by compensatory growth of non-creep fed calves during the finishing period.

- Creep feeding may tend to minimize weight differences among calves. This may be an advantage in marketing feeder calves, but it may also tend to hide genetic differences in the maternal ability of brood cows. Calves from poorer milking cows are likely to consume more creep feed, reducing differences in weaning weight and reducing the efficiency of selecting replacements and identifying and culling poor producing cows.
- Excessive fattening of young heifers may reduce lifetime productivity. It is well established that young beef females allowed to fatten excessively tend to be less regular in reproduction and frequently do not milk up to their potential.
- When pastures are good, creep feeding gives less increase in weaning weight and increased weight is not put on as efficiently as might be expected from a young animal. This is because much of the additional gain is fat, which requires more feed than growth gain. Also, the creep-fed calf does not graze as readily as calves not receiving creep feed.
- The cost of additional gain is often near the selling price for feeders. A decrease of one to two cents per pound in the selling price of a 500-pound calf in comparison to calves weighing 425-450 pounds could offset the net profit made from adding 50 to 75 pounds by creep feeding.

## KINDS OF CREEP FEEDS

- Grain can be creep fed alone, since milk and pasture are both good sources of protein. Whole oats are good for calves. Oats are relatively cheap, stay fresh longer and need no additional preparation.
- Half whole oats and half cracked corn is a good creep ration.
- With a more complex creep formula, calves may consume more and gain faster.

- Molasses increases the palatability and consumption of creep feeds.

**Sample mixture:** 5 pounds corn or barley, rolled, cracked or coarsely ground  
3 pounds whole oats  
1 pound protein supplement  
1 pound molasses (dried or liquid)

Two creep ration formulas that have been used successfully at NDSU are as follows:

oats	950	1200
corn	400	200
soybean oil meal	100	50
molasses	50	50
trace mineralized salt	6	6
vitamins A & D	+	+

- Creep feed preference studies at Minnesota showed that calves offered their choice of three creep rations consumed a mixture of rolled shelled corn and linseed meal pellets as 50 per cent of their feed intake, whole oats at 34 per cent and whole shelled corn at only 16 per cent.
- Many commercial creep feeds give excellent results. Pelleted commercial feeds are palatable, easy to handle and don't blow. These formulated creep rations may be consumed in greater amounts and produce more rapid gains. Commercial creep feeds with medication added can be obtained, and most commercial feeds include minerals and vitamins.
- Calves usually start nibbling grain at four weeks of age, but they will not eat much until they are six to eight weeks of age.
- Energy is the nutrient of importance that creep feeds can furnish calves which are receiving reasonable amounts of milk and have ample grass available during mid-summer. Later in summer and fall when milk supply declines and grasses dry up, creep rations should contain at least 12 to 14% protein, since the calves' feed intake other than creep feed will furnish less protein at that time of year.

## LOCATIONS OF CREEP FEEDER

- Place a creep feeder near the cows' loafing area. Calves will not leave their mothers for even the best creep ration.
- Feed salt to cows in the creep feeder area.

- Shaded areas are good locations for creep feeders.
- Watering places are also good locations for creep feeders.
- An empty barn or shed strategically located would provide a protected place to locate a creep feeder and also offer shade and protection from flies for calves during the hot part of the summer, as well as protection during late fall and early winter.

## CREEP FEEDERS

- Allow 3 to 4 inches per calf in determining size of feeder. Ten feet of feeder space will handle 30 to 40 calves.
- Plans for constructing creep feeders can be purchased from County Extension Offices. Ask for Beef Equipment Plans book.
- Commercially built creep feeders can be purchased from feed dealers, lumber yards, and livestock equipment companies.

- Build pens with openings about 16 inches wide and 36 inches high to let calves enter but keep cows out. Adjustable openings are even better.
- A regular self feeder or feedbunk in a pen area with feed supplies in a wagon or small storage bin nearby is satisfactory.
- For feeding calves on a more limited energy basis, a hay self feeder may be placed in the creep area.

## *Summary*

Creep feeding is not the answer to management dilemmas. Further, it is difficult to agree on a recommendation for creep feeding which will fit every management system. Purebred breeders who get a premium for bloomy calves with heavy weaning weights have different objectives than the commercial producer who winters calves on a high fiber diet and then grazes them on grass before selling them as yearlings. Producers must evaluate the objectives of their operation and then decide whether creep feeding will maximize profits. But remember, market structures in the beef business change, so be sure to evaluate the economics often. Creep feeding does not fit every herd, but it does have a place in the beef cattle industry.