Creep-Feeding: The Debate Continues

What's right for you may depend on your management preferences and feed resources.

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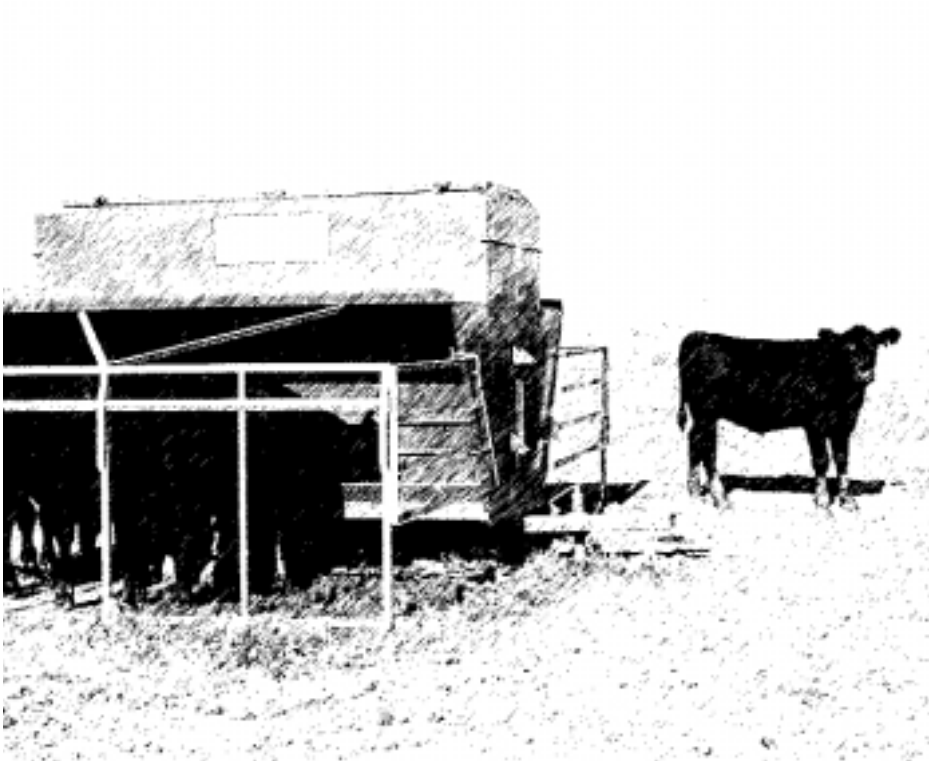

It's time to think about preweaning plans for your calves. Now is the time to consider your options. Will you supplement growth by creep-feeding or depend solely on the mother's milking ability to wean a heavier calf?

According to John Crouch, director of performance programs for the American Angus Association, commercial cow-calf operators who sell their calves as feeders can benefit greatly by creep-feeding if the conditions are right.

"If corn is cheap and cattle prices are high, it is an economically viable management practice to creep-feed calves," Crouch says.

A case for creeping

Despite feed and cattle markets, there are times when extreme environmental conditions are reason enough to creep-feed.

Those extreme conditions exist in southwest Iowa for Dave Nichols, Bridgewater, who says his grass supply runs thin in early fall. For him, grain is less expensive than grass.

Nichols feeds a commercial pelleted high-fiber creep containing about 12%-13% protein to all of his calves for 60-90 days, starting in the early fall when his pastures begin to decline.

Besides the economic advantages, Nichols says creep-feeding allows his calves to wean with less sickness and to adapt to dry feed more quickly.

A case against creeping

Wolf Creek Angus Ranch, Luray, Kan., chooses not to creep-feed their calves so as not to interfere with measuring their cows' maternal efficiency within the herd.

"We've never felt it necessary to creep-feed, although we've been fortunate to not experience severe, extended drought since establishing our herd here," says Mary Ferguson, co-owner of the north-central Kansas operation. "We want our calves' weights to truly reflect their growth ability and the ability of their dams to rear them on native grass without supplemental feed."

Creep-feeding would distort and decrease the value of the weaning performance information used to evaluate individual cow efficiency within the herd, says Ferguson. "That information entails more than merely calf weights and weaning-weight ratios."

When conditions are right

Identifying and selecting genetically superior cows within their herd is also the primary reason Circle S Ranch, Kingman, Kan., has opted not to creep-feed their calves during the last 15-20 years. Still, creep-feeding is an option Gordon Stucky, Circle S owner, knows is there if extreme conditions exist.

"The biggest reason we switched from creep-feeding to not creeping, without a doubt, was to identify the cows that were our top producers within our own environment with the forage available," Stucky says.

Stucky says when they first began their operation, they had a large number of cows that needed to be culled. Their current weaning weights are similar to when they were creeping, but the weight is coming from a different source.

Stucky is not totally opposed to creep-feeding and realizes extreme environmental conditions exist that make creep-feeding a necessity. Last winter the south-central Kansas operation experienced what Stucky describes as the worst winter in years. The extra strain put on his cows by continual severe cold weather and wet, icy conditions made creeping his fall calves inevitable.

"In defense of creep-feeding, last year we got into extreme weather conditions with our winter calves," he says. "Putting creep out lessened the burden on our cows, and we did jump our weaning weights up. Our fall calves weaned 50 to 60 pounds (lb.) heavier, even with the rough winter conditions."

Like Ferguson and Stucky, many producers worry that creep-feeding does not allow for selecting cows that are superior milkers, yet Bill Beal, beef cattle specialist at Virginia Tech, tends to disagree. He says that when they weigh their calves right before creep-feeding and again at weaning, a dramatic reranking doesn't occur.

"Cows that milk well during the first months of lactation will have bigger, stouter calves that take to creep quicker and keep that growth advantage," says Beal.

Kansas State University research offers several advantages to limited creep-feeding, including boosting weaning weights 20-40 lb., improving feed efficiency (4-6 lb. creep/1 lb. gain), and familiarizing calves with eating from a bunk and eating grain. Other benefits that K-State researchers cite include conserving and stretching pasture during drought, allowing cows to come off the pasture in better condition and weaning heavier calves.

Even so, greater labor and management is required for creep-feeding.

"Logically, it makes sense that calves that are offered creep feed will go on feed easier with less stress," says Ivan Rush, University of Nebraska Extension beef specialist.

Replacement concern

Many producers voice concern about creep-feeding replacement heifers. Crouch says creep-feeding potential replacement heifers can be detrimental due to fat buildup in their udders. Fatty tissue that develops in the udder ultimately lowers milk production; and, according to a University of Nebraska Extension publication, the impairment of future production can occur before the heifer reaches 6 months of age.

A 21-year study conducted by Purdue University lends support. The study involved 831 Angus calves that were either creep-fed or not. The study found that creep-feeding replacement females had detrimental effects on reproductive performance as indicated by the number of calves weaned, calf birth weight, calf 120- and 210-day weights and lifetime productivity.

Although Beal agrees that heifers should not be overly fat, he says producers should place an emphasis on having their females at an adequate weight and condition for breeding at 14 months, then focus on lactation once the heifers are bred. At Virginia Tech, Beal says, they aim to have their females to 65% of their mature size and weight by 14 months of age.

"The biggest problem producers have is underfeeding," Beal says. "They need to focus first on getting their heifers big enough and heavy enough to breed."

Beal says the significance in the weaning weights of females that were creep-fed vs. those that weren't isn't great enough compared to the number of females who don't breed, and therefore don't produce a calf, because they were underfed.

"The difference in weaning weights of calves from cows that were creep-fed when they were heifers vs. the cows that were not creep-fed is only about 4%," he says.

As you can see, there are two sides to every management decision. Whether your neighbor decides to creep-feed or not doesn't mean you should follow that lead.

Consider the available resources and labor, the existing environmental conditions, and what is the most economically efficient route for your operation.

INSIGHT:

EPDs *not* altered *by* creep

In today's industry the use of performance data goes hand in hand with phenotypic design for many producers making selection decisions. Can you trust the expected progeny differences (EPDs) of a creep-fed animal?

John Crouch, director of performance programs for the American Angus Association, says that creeping should be one of the factors considered when forming contemporary groups.

Jim Brink, Colorado State University, defines a contemporary group as "a group of cattle of the same breed, born in the same year/season, at the same location (same herd), of the same sex, and managed alike from birth until the time of measurement (same feeding regime, date of measurement, etc.)."

"From a genetic-evaluation standpoint, EPDs for growth will not be altered by creep-feeding calves if the entire contemporary group is fed the same way," Crouch says. "Creep-fed calves should be separated from non-creep-fed calves. Likewise, orphaned or extremely sick calves should not be compared against their normal herd mates."

Calves of the same sex born within a 90-day window can be grouped together. A significant contemporary group consists of at least 10 animals weighed within a three-day window. However, a pair of calves, if the same sex, can make up a contemporary group if needed.