

Creep Feeding - Does it Pay?

With a drier than normal fall and winter, it is taking longer for pastures to green up and have sufficient growth to support grazing this spring. To compound this problem, many pastures were overgrazed last fall, and will not produce as much forage compared to a year with normal weather conditions. This summer's weather is predicted to be hot and dry. Not encouraging for good grass growth.

When the cows and calves are on pasture, how can you optimize forage use this summer? There are management strategies available to increase calf gains without sacrificing cow condition. Creep feeding calves is an option that deserves consideration.

Creep rations need to contain sufficient protein to support growth of the calf. A 400 pound calf requires 16 percent protein to develop the frame and muscle growth. Feeding straight oats or barley will supply energy, but the calves will be short in stature, over fat and discounted at the auction market.

In a 'normal year' when calves are on creep feed, they tend to substitute creep feed for forage in their diet. If a calf consumes 90 kg (200 lb) of creep feeding throughout the summer, approximately 68 kg (150 lb) of forage dry matter is not consumed. This saving would represent an additional animal unit month of pasture for every four calves being creep fed. Under good pasture conditions, the average increase in weaning weight is 18 kg (40 lb) with a range from 10-27 kg (25 to 60 lb). For a normal year, for every 4 pounds of creep feed consumed, a calf should gain a pound of weight.

In 'dry years' when forage is limited and cows are not producing sufficient milk, calves may consume 435 kg (960 pounds) of creep feed over four months. Weight gains could be improved by 45 kg (100 pounds) or more.

Is creep feeding cost effective? The partial budget below includes the costs and benefits from creep feeding calves for a 100 cow herd. Use these figures as a guideline.

Added costs	Notes and calculations	Added Costs(\$)	Your numbers
Grain and supplement	43 tonnes for 120 days 16% protein	Commercial* \$ 10,320 Home* \$ 6,450	
Transportation	Feed to feeder	\$ 1,000	
Creep feeder	175 bushels (on wheels)	\$ 425 **	
Total		\$11,745 / \$ 7875	

* Commercial: \$240 / T

Home: 35 % barley @ 138 / T, 35 % oats @ 137 / T, 30 % peas \$157.50 / T

** 10 year amortized cost

Added Revenue or Reduced costs	Notes and Calculations	Added revenues (+) or reduced costs (-) (\$)	Your numbers
Increased weight gain	100 pounds @ \$1.00 / lb	+ \$ 10,000	
Cows on pasture	More AUM per acre	- \$ 3000 *	
Reduced winter feed cost	1400 lbs of hay / cow for 1 BCS **	- \$ 7000	
Total		\$ 20,000	

Net Benefit	Sample calculation	\$ 8,255 / \$ 12,125	
-------------	--------------------	----------------------	--

* \$30 per month as the value of a grazing AUM

** A cow in Body Condition Score (BCS) 3 going into winter requires 1400 lbs less hay compared to a thinner cow in BCS 2. Cost of hay: \$0.05 per pound.

Creep feeding calves has an associated benefit of reducing weaning stress and the occurrence of the common diseases associated with weaning. Calves tend to find the feed bunk quicker, and start eating sooner than calves that have not been exposed to creep feed. It is very difficult to put a value on these benefits.

Thin cows tend to take longer to start cycling after calving. They also are not able to produce as much milk as a cow in good condition. The quantity and quality of colostrum is reduced when a cow is thin. All these factors impact long term productivity of the herd.

For more information on creep feeding, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development has a factsheet entitled '[Creep Feeding Calves](#)' available on [Ropin' the Web](#) that discusses creep feeding in more detail. Another document that can be referred to is '[Creep Feeding – Frequently asked Questions](#)'. To discuss creep feeding with a beef specialist, contact the Ag-Info Centre at 310-3276.

By Barry Yaremicio – Beef and Forage Specialist
Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development