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Creep Grazing

Just like the “red/green wars” that happen between farm kids on the bus, preferring one brand of iron to another, there can be a good deal of banter in the livestock sector over creep feeding. Some proudly market the fact that calves “have never had a bite of creep” and others see no scenario where creep feed isn’t of benefit. As is often the case, there is no one correct answer and each situation is different. Today I’ll throw another angle into this discussion with the potential benefits of creep grazing.

Creep feeding grain-based diets has been studied in animal science circles for years, with quite a lot of data available on the subject. Many factors drive the decision to use creep feed, ranging from grass saving measures on drought stressed pastures, to maximizing growth potential expression in purebred seedstock for fall sale season and likely many other options in-between.

Typically, the biggest question is whether creep feeding is cost-effective practice? The simple answer for most spring calving, commercial cow/calf operations is “not in most circumstances”. While it is proven that pounds of weaned calf can be added, the additional cost per pound of gain is not always economical. Additionally, there is the risk of getting calves “fleshy” prior to weaning, which can have detrimental effects on selling price as weaned calves at the sale barn.

Creep grazing, on the other hand, has potential to be a more cost-effective solution. Creep grazing programs can produce additional calf gains using forage rather than the traditional grain-based creep diets. There are many ways to adapt this system to each individual situation, but the bottom line is that it must be economical and profitable. Part of the benefit of this grazing practice is a reduction in needed equipment required in grain-based creep systems.

Most forages can be used for successful creep grazing as long as they are high in nutrient quality and readily available. The season will affect which forage is used for creep grazing. During the warm season months, legumes, pearl millet, sorghum-sudan grass or mixes of these plants can be used. During the cool season months, annual grasses like rye, oats, wheat or triticale can be used often times in combination with legumes.

Similar to grain creep, the added weight gain from creep grazing depends on pasture quality and with adequate quantity as well. Daily gains tend to be less than the full fed, grain energy creep systems. Expected daily gains are usually increased by 10 to 20 percent with creep grazing compared to standard grazing systems. There is high variability with gains in research settings, pointing to a need to keep adequate quantity of the highest possible quality feeds in front of calves at all times.

A couple of primary methods have been used to allow calves access to creep forage while keeping cows out. One method is to build a creep gate with entrance slots 15- 18 inches wide and place the creep gate in the fence line or at the gate separating the creep grazing area from the main pasture. Another method is to use one strand of electric wire to allow calves to graze while keeping cows out. Placing this single strand of wire 36 to 42 inches above the ground will allow calves to pass under while keeping the cows out. Neither method requires a great deal of complexity or equipment.

Creep grazing has a few other indirect benefits. One is that calves do not get as fat as when they are fed a grain-based creep feed and may not receive price discounts often assessed to calves fed an unlimited high energy creep feed. Replacement heifers may get too fat if fed a grain-based creep feed and ultimately have reduced milk production as cows later in life. This problem is less likely to occur when using forage as a creep feed.

It is important to remember that calves consume all the milk available whether they are fed creep in any form or not. Calves prefer milk first, palatable creep feed second, then forage. If increasing cow body condition score is the desire, early weaning calves is a better approach for the cow side of the equation. Discussion here was with cattle, but the same rules apply for sheep as well. The University of Georgia has a good publication on this topic called, [“Creep Feeding Beef Calves” Bulletin 1315](#).