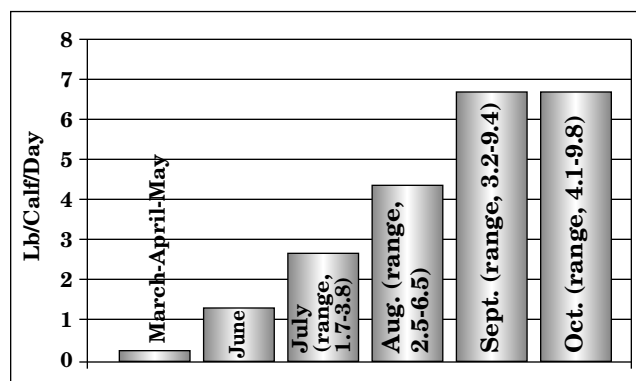




Creep Feeding As A Weaning Management Tool

Look at creep feeding as a way to increase profit, and, if not properly managed, some years you'll be disappointed. But look at it as the first step in a well-conceived, value-added process-verification program for your weaned calves, and you'll be pleased with the outcome.

Creep will improve growth rate and uniformity in nursing calves, particularly with very young or aged cows. Numerous tests have shown unlimited consumption of creep for 120 to 150 days, the conventional way that creep feeding is approached, to increase rate of gain by about 0.6 lb/day at a conversion of 7 to 10 lb of creep intake per pound of additional gain. One Missouri field test (see graph below) in which ad libitum creep intake was monitored for three consecutive years using 391 calves born in February and March showed consumption in August, September, and October to be as high as 6.5 to 9.8 lb/calf/day. As you would expect, elevation of creep intake was related to reduced rainfall and, consequently, restricted revegetation of pastures in late summer and early fall. Pastures were predominantly fescue.



Lower protein, higher starch creep feeds for uncontrolled consumption, as depicted in the graph above, are touted as being designed for:

- 1) creep feeding toward a carcass quality grid, or
- 2) rescuing calves from the growth squeeze

brought on by reduced forage supply and/or diminished milk production. One downside effect of excessive creep feed intake by heifer calves is the risk of developing poor milking herd replacements, particularly in moderate-framed females. In reality, runaway creep feed intake is simply sending out the message that it is time to wean.

Alternatively, limiting intake will result in an additional gain of about 0.3 lb/day but at a decidedly better conversion of 4 to 6 lb of creep feed per pound of additional gain. Consequently, the aspect of regulating creep intake has been exploited by many feed manufacturers in their efforts to develop novel creep feeding regimes.

Once calves begin to consume creep in excess of 0.5% of bodyweight (2 to 3 lb), which is indicative that their dependency on the cow has lessened and they are more nearly functioning as a stocker rather than a nursing calf, then the substitution effect will begin to occur in the rumen and the efficiency of forage digestion will be diminished. At that point higher protein, lower starch creep feeds designed for intakes at 0.25 to 0.5% of bodyweight become the products of choice. Guidelines for formulation of creep feeds will be forthcoming in a separate technical release from Steve Pemberton, DVM.

Proper management of creep feeding will result in calves that are bunk broke at weaning. Locate the creep feeder or creep enclosure where the cowherd gathers. Start at any time supplemental nutrition is needed; however, limit-fed creep the last 30 to 60 days before weaning will increase weaning weight by up to 20 lb and adequately train the calves to eat. At weaning, consider placing the same creep feeder(s) or bunk(s) used in the creep enclosure directly inside the weaning pen.

Calves that are not trained to eat can experience 4 to 8% shrink the first two days after separation from the cow. Approximately half of that is fill shrink, which may take several days to a week to restore after the calves begin eating, a period during which immunity can be compromised. Also, calves that are not creep fed can have 20 to 35 lb

more gut fill than creep fed calves. The supplemental protein in a limit-fed creep improves the digestibility of mature grass and prevents stretching the rumen and development of that “big gut” appearance — just one more management incentive aimed at avoiding discounts at sale time.