HUBBARD®

Beef Tech-Line

Calf Creep Feeding

June 2010

Introduction

Creep feeding is a common management practice utilized by cow calf producers. Creep feed is offered to suckling calves in such a way that the adult cows cannot access the feed. The additional nutrients provided by creep feed allow the calf to grow at a rate closer to its genetic potential. During the period from 1985 to 2003 the average birth weight of Angus bull calves increased by 1 lb. The corresponding increase in weaning weight was 162 lb. As a result of modern genetic improvements calves often have more genetic ability to grow than what the nutrients supplied in milk and pasture can support. Creep feed fills this nutritional gap by providing the extra nutrients needed so that the calves can more closely approach their genetic growth potential.

Performance

It is commonly claimed that a spring calf fed creep feed will gain an extra 100 lb over the summer compared to a calf not offered creep feed. It is also commonly claimed that it will require 400 lb of feed to achieve this. The efficiency of creep feeding is calculated by dividing the amount of creep feed fed by the extra weight gain attributed to the creep feed. In this example the feed efficiency of creep feeding is 400/100 or 4:1. These numbers are useful to use when planning your creep program but in reality performance varies from season to season, year to year, region to region and farm to farm. Some of the differences are predictable. Clearly a producer that offers creep feed for 150 days will utilize more creep feed than a producer who offers creep feed for 60 days. In some geographical areas calves are weaned before harvest making for a shorter creep feed season, in other areas weaning is after harvest making for a longer season. Other factors affecting creep performance are not predictable. The amount of rainfall and the resulting quantity and quality of pasture impact creep intake and performance. Producers generally determine their creep feed program before the creep feeding season so they don't know exactly what their intakes will be or how much extra calf weight the program will generate. Fortunately in most markets calf weight gain commands a large premium over creep feed cost. Creep feeding sometimes makes more money and sometimes less money but almost always makes money. Once a producer tries creep feed he generally continues this management practice year after year.

Getting Started

Feed efficiency is best in young animals and creed feed efficiency is no exception. Offering creep feed early in the season is a good strategy. The calves will not eat much to begin with but creep feed efficiency associated with their intake will be good. Very young calves need some coaxing to get started. One strategy is to offer a texturized feed in the creep feeder trough. Simply pour texturized feed into the trough and keep it available and fresh. Calves will be more attracted to slightly dry texturized feed. Go easy on the molasses. Show-Rite® Calf Pre-Creep D45.4 (#32U2) can be used for this purpose. Another application of this technique is for situations where coccidiosis is a concern. It is difficult to effectively control or treat coccidiosis in suckling calves. Utilize this technique to start calves on dry feed so that they can be medicated and protected from coccidiosis.

Pasture Conditions

Occasionally spring and early summer can be mild and moist offering ideal conditions for grass growth. Some producers see that as an opportunity to save money and not offer creep feed. Many times these producers are disappointed in their results. Even though the grass is good it does not fill the nutritional gap well enough for the calves to grow to their genetic potential. Other years drought is an issue and pasture quality is poor much of the summer. Creep fed calves easily outperform non creep fed calves in those conditions. Creep feed adds year to year uniformity to the calf crop.

(continued on next page)

Late Season

Weaning late in the fall after harvest can pose challenges. Many times pastures are severely eaten down and cow milk production is greatly reduced. Creep feed is formulated to be a supplement to milk and grass. If milk and grass are not readily available calves can over consume creep feed. Always limit creep feed to 1.5 percent of the body weight or less. When creep consumption gets that high it is time to wean the calves.

Limit Feeding

There are two main reasons to limit creep feed consumption 1) try to limit late season creep consumption to less than 1.5 percent of body weight and 2) to optimize the feed efficiency associated with creep feed consumption. Salt, Rumensin and fish oil are all effective in accomplishing these goals. Increasing the salt content of a creep feed to about 7.5% depresses creep intake. The cattle can get used to that level and sometimes it is necessary to increase the salt to approximately 11% to achieve the desired result. It is critically important that the calves have unlimited access to a clean water source when using salt to control intake. Products that limit creep intake are usually medicated with Rumensin. Feed manufacturing plants that have fish oil available offer a couple other options. Utilizing the Regulator program as a creep feed offers a method of controlling creep intake that can be followed with a seamless transition to a weaning diet. Fish oil can also be added to pelleted creep. This will help control late season over consumption. Calf Creep 14% Limiter R60 (#25526) is an example. It needs to be noted that none of these methods of intake control work unless adequate forage is available. If the pasture is used up and the animals are hungry they will fill up with and over consume creep feed regardless of the limiter employed.

Bunk Breaking

Creep fed calves know what feed is and know what feeders are, giving them a huge advantage come weaning time.

New Thinking

Pelleted “complete” creep feeds formulated with low starch fibrous ingredients have for decades been the gold standard. A new opportunity along those lines is the incorporation of dry distillers grains into a creep formula. Distillers is a high digestible fiber ingredient that lacks starch. GainRite® Creep Concentrate (#3GY5) can be utilized along with distillers and grains to make an effective creep feed. Much attention is currently being given to the influence of early caloric intake on marbling. This topic needs further study before solid recommendations can be made but there may be a place for grain based creep feeds for producers looking for maximum quality grade.

Summary

Spring 2010 cattle fundamentals are extremely promising. Markets with high calf prices and moderate to low creep feed prices make creep feeding an economically attractive management tool. Along with the economic advantages cow calf producers gain other benefits of creep feeding such as a more uniform calf crop and easier weaning. Once a producer starts creep feeding he seldom discontinues the practice. This is an opportune year to get all your customers started on a creep feed program.

Hubbard Feeds Inc.
PO Box 8500
Mankato, MN 56002-8500
1-800-869-7219
www.hubbardfeeds.com