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Increase quality with creep feeding

By Jennifer Ryan

Beyond increasing weights, preparing calves for weaning with a little feed can increase quality grade, reduce disease risk and decrease chances for digestive problems.

“Creep feeding can pay if you’re going to put those cattle on a high-concentrate diet,” notes Dan Faulkner, Extension Beef Specialist at the University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign. “Our data says that a high-grain creep will initiate marbling, and cattle will get a much higher quality grade.”

Every day calves are on a high-grain diet, they can gain 0.01 of a quality grade, he says. Creep feeding allows cattle to get more days on a high-grain diet without getting excessively fat. This management tool can set the stage for high-quality cattle.

Faulkner says the key to creep feeding is providing adequate starch in the ration. He recommends 60 to 75 percent grain to see quality-grade results.

Creep feeding also can benefit cattle’s health. In one study, Faulkner and colleagues treated only 2 to 3 percent creep-fed calves for illness while 30 to 40 percent of the control group was treated.

“Just knowing how to eat seemed to make the creep-fed group less stressed, and that increased their health,” Faulkner says. “If we get into no-antibiotic systems, this type of management is going to be more and more critical.”

Calves entering a preconditioning program or producers that plan to retain ownership are the mostly likely groups to benefit from creep feeding, notes Keith Lusby, Head of the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Arkansas.

“Creep feeding may help get those calves familiar with mixed feeds and the weaning procedure,” Lusby says. “In many cases, calves that haven’t been creep fed have never seen mixed feed. All they’ve known is mother’s milk and grass. When someone pours some feed in a feed bunk, they don’t recognize that’s feed. If they’ve had exposure to feed, calves recognize it and go on feed more quickly. When they’re getting good nutrition, it helps the health situation and eases the transition on to a diet of mixed feed.”

Any time calves don’t eat is a period of stress, which renders the calf susceptible to disease, particularly bovine respiratory disease (BRD), or shipping fever. On the other hand, Lusby says cattle eating properly and receiving adequate nutrition have more resistance to disease, and tools like vaccines work better. Calves accustomed to eating feed also will eat in a more uniform fashion, lowering chances for digestive upsets.

Lusby recommends creep feeding for a period of about four weeks prior to weaning. This gives ample time to get calves adjusted feed, but doesn’t invest much money into the program. Even this short time can add 20 to 60 pounds to the weaning weight.

There are two types of creep-feeding systems in use today, notes David Lalman, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist at Oklahoma State University. Producers can choose from free-choice feeding or limit-fed feeding.

In free-choice creep feeding, calves will probably go from low consumption to more than 6 pounds per head per day. In limit feeding, creep intake is going to be limited by salt to a target of 1 to 3 pounds of feed per head per day.

“A limit-feeding system works well for calves grazing low quality forage, during a drought or while nursing dry cows,” Lalman says. “The high protein, limited intake has a very efficient conversion because you’re filling a protein deficiency and the calves convert feed more efficiently.”

The downside of creep feeding is its effects on heifer calves, Faulkner says. Heifers can suffer a 25 percent reduction in milk production once they become cows. Split-sex feeding can help eliminate some of the problem.

“Overall, for people that are selling on quality grids, creep feeding is an excellent management tool,” Faulkner says.