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## Creep Grazing

Sometimes accidental benefits come to fruition because of management decisions. If memory serves, I've mentioned the implementation of a virtual fencing system in the cowherd I manage. While I had many goals around grazing and cowherd management, one thing that I didn't fully plan on was the natural ability of calves to "creep graze" ahead of their mothers. A more typical discussion of creep feeding involves grain-based diets but today let's look at the benefits of utilizing higher quality forages to accomplish gains in calves.

There is a wealth of research data showing that creep feeding calves a wide range of grain-based diets can increase weaning weights. It is not uncommon to see an increased weight at weaning of fifty pounds, plus or minus thirty pounds. However, in many cases, the value of added weight gain will not cover the added expenses of creep feeding. This is especially true in spring calving herds compared to fall born calves on creep. Currently lower commodity prices and higher value of weaned pounds of calf may shift the scales a bit today but pushing a pencil to see if the math works, is always important.

If there is a way to simply utilize the higher quality feedstuff that is already in front of the calves, cost of gain goes down. Creep grazing has the potential to be a more cost-effective solution for this reason. Creep grazing programs can produce additional calf gains using forage rather than the traditional grain-based creep diets. Every operation is different on how this can be managed, but profitability must be the driver for implementation of any creep feeding system.

Most forages can be used for successful creep grazing if they are high in nutrient quality and immediately available. Time of year will affect which forage is used for creep grazing. During the warm season months, producers can use legumes, millets, or sorghum-sudan grass. During the cool season months, annual grasses like rye, oats, wheat or ryegrass can be used. Simply grazing ahead of the perennial forages provides higher quality forage as well, with cool or warm season grasses.

The basic concept is to keep the cows out of an area while allowing calves access. One method is to build a creep gate and place it 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 holding the cows back. As mentioned earlier, the virtual fencing system works very well for this practice as well, as the calves aren't restricted by the virtual boundaries and cows are.

Like grain creep feeds, the added weight gain from creep grazing depends on pasture quality and adequate quantity of higher quality forages as well. Daily gains do tend to be less than the full fed energy creep systems. Daily gains can be increased by 10 to 20 percent with creep grazing, however, improvements in daily gains from no additional gain to 50 percent have been reported. This highlights the effects that pasture quality and quantity have on gains of creep-grazed calves.

Creep grazing has a few other indirect benefits. One big one is the type of gain is less likely to be fat compared to when they are fed a grain-based creep feed. Fat calves often receive a price discount when sold as feeder calves. Replacement heifers may get too fat if fed a grain-based creep feed and have reduced milk production. This issue with fat is less likely to occur when using forage as a creep.

Creep grazing may not work for every management system, but it certainly is worth looking at. West Virginia University has a publication called ["Creep Grazing"](#) that discusses this topic and has a short "Yes or No" checklist that can be a useful tool for guiding decisions. Push the pencil and see if you can get economical gains on forage-based creep systems.