



Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan Inc.

## Creep Feeding Calves

*Creep feeding is one of the management strategies which can be employed when drought reduces pasture quantity or quality. It can increase calf weights by up to 50 lbs and cow weights by up to the same amount.*

Every pound of creep feed eaten can save up to a pound of forage dry matter, which the calf would otherwise consume. This takes some pressure off the cow, helping to maintain or improve her body condition. Bringing the cow into winter in good body condition has the advantage of reducing cold stress and related feed requirements and maintaining next year's fertility.

Creep feeding fits well with an early weaning strategy – creep feed can be used from when calves are about 50 days of age until they are about 400 lbs or 150 days of age and then wean. Weaning stress is greatly reduced, as calves are accustomed to dry feed.

### Rations for Creep Feeding

Calves like whole or coarsely rolled or ground grain. Good quality whole oats is a favourite creep feed. The bulk of whole oats reduces over consumption problems and calves seem to like to chew the grain better than cows.

A complete creep ration should contain 1.4 Mcal Digestible Energy (DE)/lb or 70% Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) and 13% to 16% crude protein, 0.7% Ca, 0.5% P, TM salt and vitamins ADE (plus Se in deficient areas).

When pastures are dry, the protein content of the grass is much lower. Added protein in the creep makes sense under those conditions. Use a natural protein source, pelleted, so it won't separate from the whole or coarse grain and bring the creep ration to 16%.

An example ration might be 40% rolled barley, 50% whole oats and 10% pelleted canola meal or soybean meal plus free choice complete mineral mix with vitamins. A complete pelleted creep might be 25% oats, 50% barley, 25% canola plus salt, vitamins and minerals.

Coarse rolled field peas added to the grain mix at roughly 25%, increases both energy and protein. However calves find it quite palatable and may overeat so, hand feeding to limit consumption may be necessary.

Pea or lentil screenings added to the grain mix may be a less expensive alternative to increasing protein levels and still provide bulk in the ration. Screenings from canola may be less palatable. Bran in the mix increases palatability and its bulk helps reduce overeating.

### Creep Feeding Management

Fencing off a small shaded area near the water source works well, however a moveable creep feeder may allow better pasture management. Creep feeding works better on smaller pastures compared to open range.

Creep feed can be fed in bunks, troughs or self-feeders. An opening 16 to 18 inches (40 to 45 cm) wide and 3 to 3.5 feet (0.9 to 1 meter) high will keep the cows out and let the calves in. Provide 12 inches (30 cm) of bunk space for every three calves.

A few management tips will help the process:

- Young calves are very susceptible to digestive upsets (acidosis and scours) from inconsistent feed intake.
- Hand feed the creep feed at first to avoid over eating.
- Put out only enough feed for a week as calves find stale feed unpalatable.
- Monitor intake on a daily basis even when on self-feed.
- Do not let the creep feeder go empty for more than a few hours to avoid overeating.
- Intake should be 1% of body weight, or 1 lb (1/2 kg) creep feed for every 100 lbs (50 kg).
- Avoid dusty fine ground feed. The addition of 5% molasses or 2% canola oil will reduce dustiness, reduce sorting of pellets or minerals from the grain and increase palatability.
- Ensure heifer calves to be kept for breeding do not get too fat. Fat in the developing udder can greatly reduce her lifetime milking ability as a cow. Some research has shown that creep feeding replacement heifers for longer than 3 to 6 weeks can reduce lifetime milk production by up to 25%.

As a regular management practice, OTHER THAN when typically used in late fall when cows' milk production drops off along with forage quality and quantity, creep feeding has a number of disadvantages. These must be taken into account when calculating the economic value and include such issues as cost relative to added gain, masking effect on dam's milking ability, value of added weaning weight at sale, subsequent performance of the calf in a feedlot or as a replacement.

However, as an emergency measure in times of serious drought with limited pasture resources, especially in combination with early weaning, creep feeding can be a useful management practice which helps maintain weaning weights and cow body condition.

For more information:

- Western Forage Beef Group (Foragebeef.ca) – [www.foragebeef.ca](http://www.foragebeef.ca)
- Western Beef Development Centre – [/www.wbdc.sk.ca](http://www.wbdc.sk.ca)
- Prairie Feed Resource Centre – [www.feedresources.usask.ca](http://www.feedresources.usask.ca)
- SAFRR – [www.agr.gov.sk.ca/Livestock.asp?firstPick=Livestock](http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca/Livestock.asp?firstPick=Livestock)
- AAFRD – [www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/app21/rtw/index.jsp](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/app21/rtw/index.jsp)
- MAFRI – [www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/index.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/index.html)



Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan Inc.

502 - 45th Street West, 2nd Floor, Saskatoon, SK S7L 6H2

Phone: 306-249-3227 Fax: 306-244-4497

e-mail: [facs@sasktel.net](mailto:facs@sasktel.net)

website: [www.facs.sk.ca](http://www.facs.sk.ca)

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*This FACS initiative is funded by the Saskatchewan Beef Development Fund and endorsed by the Western Beef Development Centre, Saskatchewan Livestock Association, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association and the Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association.*