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Feed prices may encourage creep feeding

Today's high feed prices could make this the perfect year to try creep feeding.

"As we look at the times of high feed prices, people would say, 'Maybe that's a reason not to creep feed,'" says Dan Faulkner, University of Illinois animal scientist. "But it may be even more of a reason to creep feed, because feedlots are wanting more weight on the calves."

In the past, "fleshy" cattle brought discounts at the auction barn, but that's shifting.

"We've always had lighter calves bring more than heavier calves because we had cheap feed. We could put gain on cheaper than we could buy that gain," he says. "If it cost more to put it on that it does to buy it, feeders are going to want to buy more of that weight."

Mike Krakoviak, director of Land O' Lakes Purina Feed's cattle business group, says creep-fed calves can be worth more for other reasons, too.

"Evidence has shown that these calves wean easier, because they already know how to eat," he says. "They stay healthier, too, which carries more performance into and out of the feedyard."

That has bonuses no matter how the calves are marketed.

"There's a lot of data proving calves that know how to eat and are vaccinated and weaned are worth more, no matter how they're sold, whether they are retained, sold at a salebarn or on private treaty," Krakoviak says.

The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) *Best Practices Manual* nutritional management chapter notes, "Supplemental feed while still nursing can have a significant effect on marbling." It suggests small- to medium-frame calves gain 2 to 2.5 pounds (lb.) per day and large-frame calves up to 3 lb. per day.

Faulkner agrees: "If you want to have calves deposit marbling, you need to have them gaining more than their maximum protein or muscle gain. They've got to be able to put down a little bit of extra energy."

Research shows starch-based diets work best when aiming for quality, and calves must continue their rate of gain or the advantage is lost. An Illinois trial had cattle gaining well prior to placement on poor-quality fescue pasture where they gained barely half a pound a day.

“It really decreased the rate of marbling,” Faulkner said. “What’s more, once those cattle did go into the feedlot, they never did marble well. We turned that switch off, if you will.”

Today’s genetics may provide extra incentive to creep feed.

“If you have a high-performance herd, creep feeding really makes a lot of sense,” Krakoviak says.

“We clearly have bigger, better, faster-growing cattle than we did in the past,” Faulkner says.

“When you push calves hard, you’re going to have a little less carcass weight than if you were feeding yearling cattle.

“That’s critical if you have small-frame cattle, but with today’s larger-frame, faster-growing genetics, we are going to have very desirable end points without putting them through a prolonged stocker phase,” he says.

Benefits of creep feeding extend beyond the calves.

“Providing creep feeds should help to reduce the pressure not only on the cows, but on the pasture, too,” Krakoviak says. “It might allow you to run a few more cows on a given acreage.”

It also could improve conception rates and milking ability of younger females.

“They’re still growing themselves, and then you’re trying to rebreed them, and then they’re supposed to be taking care of this calf,” Krakoviak says. “That’s a lot of pressure on a cow or especially a first-calf heifer. The creep feed can help her get the job done.”

A savings in feed cost applies here, too.

“Feed costs for our cows are higher now. We should be strategic in our supplementation,” he says. Calving later to match pasture resources with needs is one option. Early weaning is another.

“Calves are extremely efficient,” Faulkner says. “They’re converting at less than 3:1 (pounds of feed to gain) up until about 700 lb. That’s a whole lot cheaper way to grow them than trying to feed the cow to milk and take care of the calf.”

The CAB manual suggests early weaning between 80 and 150 days of age to maximize carcass quality.

For copies of the *Best Practices Manual*, contact Marilyn Conley at 800-225-2333 or MConley@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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