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## **Is Creep Feeding Cost Effective?**

Keeping a tight grip on feed costs while growing a high-quality product is the priority for every beef producer. Commercial producers that sell at weaning choose to creep feed or not based on feed and cattle prices, and each year may be a little different. Seedstock producers choose based on genetic potential, and producers that retain ownership through slaughter decide on creep feeding based on carcass outcomes. Regardless of the end goal, the gain cost has to be less than the gain value for creep feeding to pay out.

For commercial producers, the end goal is realized at weaning. Spending more than the market price to produce additional weight gain is unprofitable. The conversion of feed to gain can vary from 3 to 12 pounds of feed for each pound of gain above non-creep-fed calves. One might assume that creep feeding is more valuable when calf prices are high, but when calf prices are high, the discounts are greater for increased weight. Creep-feeding grain for 100 days should add 60 pounds of weaning weight to a calf. In most years, it must cost less than \$0.50 to \$0.60 per pound in labor, feed, and equipment to add 1 pound of gain.

Determining the value of the additional pounds of calf due to creep feeding deserves additional discussion. A common misconception is that each additional pound is worth the price of calves. Often, producers use the expected selling price to determine the feasibility and profit/loss of creep feeding. What is overlooked in that analysis is that as calf price increases, the price received per pound decreases. In that case, a 525-pound calf that sells for \$2.90 is worth \$129.50 less than a calf that, because of creep feeding, weighs 590 pounds and sells for \$2.80 per pound. Dividing the \$129.50 per head by 65 pounds of additional gain equates to a value of gain of \$1.99 per pound, which is only about two-thirds of the selling price per pound. Failing to correctly calculate the value of adding growth-enhancing technology such as creep feeding could lead managers to adopt practices that aren't economically justified.

| Budget Items                                          | 1         | 2             | Formula         |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|
|                                                       | No Creep  | Creep Feeding |                 |
| A. Weaning Weight                                     | 525       | 590           |                 |
| B. Creep feed fed, pounds                             |           | 550           |                 |
| C. Calf value, \$/pound                               | \$2.90    | \$2.80        |                 |
| D. Calf Value                                         | \$1,522.5 | \$1,652.00    | A*C             |
| E. Value/pound added gain                             |           | \$1.99        | (D2-D1)/(A2-A1) |
| F. Creep feed cost, \$/ton                            |           | \$240         |                 |
| G. Expected conversion, pounds feed per pound of gain |           | 8             |                 |
| H. Feed cost/pound of added gain                      |           | \$0.96        | (F2/2000)*G2    |
| I. Value of added gain, \$/head                       |           | \$129.50      | D2-D1           |
| J. Cost of added gain, \$/head                        |           | \$62.40       | (A2-A1)*H2      |
| K. Return per head, \$                                |           | \$67.10       | I2-J2           |

Example budget for calculating creep-feeding returns. *Adapted from Walker et al., 2013*

The seed stock producer might creep feed to fully express the genetic potential in calf growth. Creep feeding will have the added benefit of getting heifers to breeding size in a timelier fashion. However, long-term data suggests that creep-fed heifers can have lower milk production, decreasing lifetime productivity.

In operations where the cattle are fast-tracked through the industry sectors, creep-feeding benefits will be realized at harvest. Calves fed a grain-based diet will have a higher marbled carcass. Some research trials increased the final quality grade one score by creep feeding for 100 days, taking a low-choice carcass to average-choice. To continue this boosted trend, calves should continue being fed a grain-based diet immediately after weaning and adjusted to a feedlot finishing diet within 28 days after weaning.

Other factors are to consider, unrelated to the operation's selling time. High-quality, abundant forage results in poor feed conversion because one high-quality feed (forage) is being replaced by another (grain). On the other hand, if the cows are in a maintenance or energy-negative nutrition program, like fall calvers on native pastures, then creep feeding will have a high feed to gain conversion.

Calves prefer milk first, palatable creep feed second, then forage. Experiments that tracked cow weight and calf milk intake showed that calves consume all the milk available whether they are fed creep-fed or not. Creep feeding simply does not change or improve cow body condition. Each year, all operations need to calculate the cost of labor, equipment, and feed to determine if creep feeding is profitable.

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