

ID-76

CREEP GRAZING FOR BEEF CALVES

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Creep grazing calves on separate pastures from cows can add pounds to calf weaning weights. In creep grazing, nursing calves get special attention. They either graze before the cows do, getting first choice of the more succulent, highly nutritious pasture, or they have access to special pastures. They enter the special pastures through gates with openings large enough for calves but too small for cows to get through. In an alternative method, electric fences are positioned high enough (36 to 42 inches) for calves to pass while cows cannot.

Why Creep Graze?

Recommended calving seasons for Kentucky commercial cow/calf producers are generally spring, Feb. 15 - April 30 and fall, Sept. 1 - Nov. 1. These calving seasons result from breeding periods, May 1 through July 20 and Nov. 20 through January 20, for spring and fall, respectively. Pastures can be planned to produce nutrition adequate to support high conception rates at these times. Pastures for breeding can provide abundant, high quality feed for both the cow and the calf up to the time calves are 3 to 4 months old. After cows are bred, in either fall or spring, the availability and quality of forage usually declines.

Further, it is expensive and inefficient to feed cows extra feed to produce more milk for calves late in the lactation period. Calves depend on milk for the first 3 to 4 months of their lives but after that age most of their gain comes from feed other than milk. High quality forage can produce most of this gain. Creep grazing, therefore, is an appropriate method to ensure that calves have access to high quality forage and consequently increase weaning weights.

Heavy calves need more than milk. Spring calves reach the critical age when milk is declining and high quality forage is needed. However, if tall rescue is the predominant forage species, both quantity and quality of pastures will have declined at the very time calves need high quality forage most. Fall-born calves reach this age generally in January and February, when there is little pasture growth. Therefore, to maintain economical calf gains during this time period, producers have 3 choices: **(1)** creep feed grain, **(2)** creep feed high quality forages, or, **(3)** feed both cows and calves abundantly.

Creep Feeding Options

Creep feeding grain can increase calf weaning weights by 40 to 75 lb. However, the cost is high. Creep-fed calves generally require 8 to 17 lb of grain for each pound of added gain, because calves prefer eating readily available creep feed to grazing forages. Rather than gain from creep feed being "added on," this gain comes from the calves' eating grain "in place of" forages. Prevailing prices for grain and feeder calves often make creep feeding with grain unprofitable.

Creep feeding is not without some problems. **(1)** Creep-fed steer calves may get too fat to command top prices as feeders if they are early maturing (genetically). Fat deposits in udders of heifer calves kept for breeding may decrease their future milk production. **(2)** In addition, creep feeding makes differences in weaning weights between calves more difficult to attribute to genetics, so selection of replacement

heifers and breeding bulls becomes less accurate if based on weaning weight.

Creep Grazing Forage

Creep grazing high quality forages produces additional weight gains with minimum cost. Possible advantages of creep grazing are

- *Increased weaning weight under most conditions.*
- *Generally lower cost than creep feeding grain.*
- *Less labor and more convenience than creep feeding grain.*
- *Allowing for increased stocking rate of cow/calf units without sacrificing weaning weights. Because calves 3 to 4 month of age gain from high quality forage, forage replaces milk.*
- *Less dependence on persistent milk production.*
- *If creep grazing is practiced, extra emphasis can be given to maintaining legumes in only areas which will be creep grazed. For example, efforts can be targeted at allowing increased weaning weights by renovating only the part of the pasture area available to calves.*

Creep Gates

Creep gate plans (<OL:OBJECT,"IP23C.BMP",BITMAPFigure 1 & <OL:OBJECT,"ID76B.BMP",BITMAPFigure 2) are available at County Extension Offices. However, any opening large enough for calves to pass through but too small for cows can serve as a creep gate. Creep gates range from 15 to 18 inches wide and from 36 to 42 inches high. The 18-inch width is recommended only for bigger calves, up to 600 lb, because small cows may be able to pass through wider openings.

You can also provide for partial opening of gates between pastures. A second gate post can be set 15 to 18 inches from the permanent post or a rigid latch can keep the gate opened the desired width.

Creep Fences

Electric fences high enough (36 to 42 inches high) for calves to pass under are effective and easy to use. Because they are flexible and easy to adjust for height, electric fences also allow producers to periodically ration graze calves on small areas of pasture. The newer portable electric polyethylene and steel braided wire fences are quick to set up and move and are versatile. Ease of movement allows for changing the creep area frequently to maintain forage quality and availability. (See Cooperative Extension publication ID-74, Planning Fencing Systems for Intensive Grazing Management.) In areas where electric power is not available small, low-cost battery chargers or solar powered units can be used. In some cases, where calves have developed a high respect for electric fences, it may be necessary to train calves to use "shock proof" passes under the hot wire.

Electric Creep Gates

Electric creep gates can be easily constructed to be used with permanent electric fencing (<OL:OBJECT,"ID76C.BMP",BITMAPFigure 3). By using insulated handles at each end of the gate, the gate height may be adjusted to allow creep grazing for different sizes of calves or to close off the pasture from creep grazing.

Forages for Creep Grazing

The forage or forage combination that is best suited for creep grazing will vary according to the season

and local conditions Regrowth of alfalfa and red clover hay fields provides high quality creep grazing in the summer if moisture is adequate.

Table 1. Forages for Creep Grazing.

Summer	Available	Winter	Available
Alfalfa	Apr.-Nov.	Small Grains and/or	Oct-Nov.
Clover	Apr.-Nov.	Ryegrass	Mar.-May
Birdsfoot Trefoil	Apr.-Nov.	Crimson Clover	Mar.-May
Summer Annuals	July-Sept.		

Summer annuals can be established in tillable areas of permanent pastures or in rotation hay meadows and grain fields. Millet, sudangrass and sorghum-sudangrass hybrids grow rapidly and produce high-quality forage.

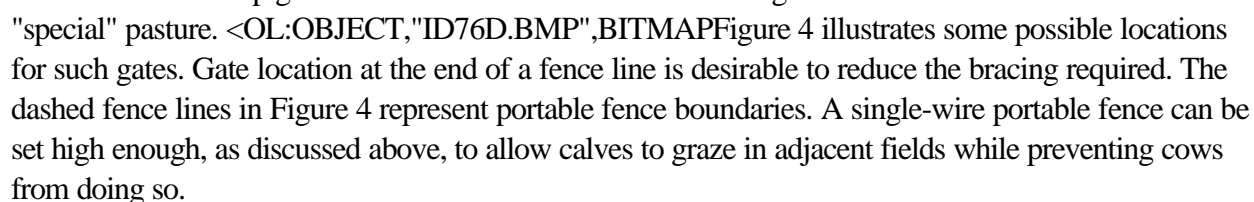
For fall-born calves, stored forages such as legume hay or protein-supplemented corn silage can be used as well as grain-based creep rations. Grain and hay prices should determine the creep ration annually. Cover crop pastures or intentionally planted small grain pastures can also provide high quality calf creep. Interested producers should get AGR-88, Producing Summer Annual Grasses for Emergency Supplemental Forage, or AGR-63, Small Grains Pastures, from their County Extension Office.

Stocking Rate

The pasture area required to feed a cow/calf unit varies from approximately .1 to 5 acres in Kentucky. What portion of the total acreage is utilized by the calf is difficult to assess. If creep grazing is used to increase the stocking rate, then the special creep pasture set aside for calves must be large enough to supply most of their feed requirements from 4 to 8 months of age.

Land production potential, forage type, fertility and season all affect the size of acreage needed to provide adequate forage. However, on the average creep pasture areas providing one acre of forage for every 5 to 10 calves should suffice. This rate is appropriate for pastures rotationally grazed and properly rested.

Locating the Creep Gate

Location of the creep gates should allow the calves to advance graze or allow them access to a "special" pasture.  Figure 4 illustrates some possible locations for such gates. Gate location at the end of a fence line is desirable to reduce the bracing required. The dashed fence lines in Figure 4 represent portable fence boundaries. A single-wire portable fence can be set high enough, as discussed above, to allow calves to graze in adjacent fields while preventing cows from doing so.

Locate creep gates near shade, water or mineral feeders because calves may be reluctant to leave their mothers and move through the gates into adjacent fields.

Starting Calves on Creep Pastures

When you first offer calves the special pasture, it may also be helpful to let both cows and calves

through the creep gate for a short period. Calves will then return to the high quality forage after cows have been removed. Calves' natural curiosity and growing independence will usually be enough to entice them under the electric fences or through creep gates and the high quality forage will keep them coming back.