

## Nutrition Edition

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\*Supplement and management strategies provided by nutrition consultant Dustin Elkins.

# Improve Your Creep Feeding Strategy

Twelve do's and don'ts to take your creep feeding program to the next level.

by *Kindra Gordon*

If you creep feed calves prior to weaning each fall, are you managing your feeding program effectively and efficiently? Dustin Elkins, a nutrition consultant for CHS Southwest Grain in Richardton, N.D., advocates creep feeding for the benefits it provides calves, cows and pastures. However, he emphasizes “the devil is in the details” when developing a successful program.

Paying attention to a few do's and don'ts can help offset the extra cost of creep feeding. Elkins suggests preparing for next summer's creep feeding season with these tips:



Maximize creep feeding potential by considering location, number of head and consumption.

- 1) Consider feeder placement.** Place feeders where cattle congregate, like a water source, so calves will begin to use them and to grow accustomed to them. Spilling some feed on the ground may encourage calves to move inside the creep feeder. Once calves increase their feed intake, Elkins says the feeders should be moved farther into pastures. This new placement ensures cattle will continue to eat some forage, as well as walk for exercise. It will also help balance grazing areas in pastures.
- 2) Plan for one 8-foot creep feeder for every 50-75 head.** Avoid overcrowding creep feeders to ensure each calf has an equal opportunity to grow.
- 3) Place mineral feeders near the creep feeders.** This dual placement will help attract the cows and draw the calves to more remote areas of the pasture.
- 4) Locate creep feeders where they can easily be serviced and refilled with a feed truck.** Avoid low spots that can get muddy or flooded and windy hilltops where a feeder may blow over.
- 5) Clean creep feeders after every rain** or pellets can get mushy, which attracts flies and ruins feed.

**6) Keep the feed gates at a “two-finger” width opening.**

This reduces feed buildup in the trough and minimizes wasted feed. If you can put your whole fist under the feed gate, or if calves are dragging out more feed than you want, Elkins recommends setting the gate lower.

**7) Creep feed intake should not exceed 1.5% of a calf's bodyweight.**

A 500 lb. calf should not eat more than 7.5 lb. of creep feed per day. If a calf needs more feed, it is time to move to fresh grass or to wean the calves, Elkins says.

**8) Never let the creep feeder run empty.**

Refilling a feeder that was empty for a few days may cause calves to overeat, which is costly and can trigger health issues.

**9) Utilize a high-fiber, high-protein formulation.**

This combination complements the calf's forage diet and also promotes muscle growth. Elkins cautions a high starch formulation feed can cause problems with forage consumption and a negative associative effect in the rumen.

**10) Consider a mineral package that includes** chelated copper, zinc and manganese, as well as an ionophore such as Bovatec or Rumensin. The minerals benefit overall calf health, while the ionophore is designed to enhance feed efficiency, limit overeating and prevent coccidiosis.

**11) Do not move the creep feeder into the weaning corral.**

Creep feed is developed for suckling calves on pasture — it is not intended as a self-feeder in a corral. Elkins points out different feed rations are available for weaned calves.

**12) Do not leave empty creep feeders in the pasture year-round.**

If cows are accustomed to empty feeders, it is difficult to train cow and calf pairs to eat out of feeders when they are put back in use on a creep feeding program. **HW**

## Why creep feed?

Boosting calf weight gain is the primary reason producers creep feed calves. CHS Southwest Grain nutrition consultant Dustin Elkins notes studies have shown calves will put on an additional 70 to 100 lb. when offered creep feed for four to eight weeks prior to weaning. He notes it costs approximately \$60 per head to creep feed for that time period.

However, Elkins wants producers to recognize that creep feeding is not solely about the extra calf pounds — there is also value in reducing forage use by calves. Additionally, lessening lactation needs from cows so they can maintain body condition is important for producers. Elkins cites one study revealing calves on creep feed consume 38% less forage, which can be particularly beneficial in a drought year.

Calf health is another benefit of creep feeding. Elkins notes creep fed calves know to go to the bunk and eat once they are weaned, and because of the extra nutrition they have had from creep feed, tend to have stronger immune systems and better rumen function postweaning. “It's a seamless transition to the feedlot,” Elkins says. **HW**

