COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Feed Conversions of Creep Feeds for Nursing Calves

by Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Feed conversions of calves fed creep feeds have been quite variable to say the least. Conversions of 5:1 or 5 pounds of grain consumed to 1 extra pound of calf weight are very rare and the optimum that can be expected when producers are using a "typical" high energy creep feed. Conversions may get as poor as 15:1 in some situations. Therefore it is obvious that several factors come in to play to determine the amount of creep feed that is consumed for each additional pound of gain.

Cows that give large amounts of milk to their calves will provide enough protein and energy to meet the growth potential of their calves. In that scenario, it is reasonable to assume that the feed conversion from creep feeding could be quite poor (10:1 or worse). If however the milk production of the cows is limited for any reason, then the added energy and protein from the creep feed provides needed nutrients to allow calves to reach closer to their genetic maximum capability for growth. Calves from poor milking cows may convert the creep feed at a rate of about 7 pounds of feed for each pound of

additional calf weight. Poor milking can be a result of genetically low milk production or restricted nutritional status. Nutritional restriction due to drought situations often adversely affects milk production and therefore calf weaning weights. Shortened hay supplies and reduced standing forage due to drought or severe winter weather often set the stage for the best results from creep feeding.

These feed conversion ratios become important when making the decision to buy and put out creep feed for spring born calves. One review of data on creep feeding concluded that an average estimate of feed to gain ratio would be 9 pounds of feed to each 1 pound of added gain. As you are calculating the cost of creep feeds, remember to include the depreciation cost of the feeders and the delivery of the feed. Then of course, it is important to compare that cost of creep feeding to the realistic "value of added gain". Estimates for the value of each pound of added gain next fall will be near $1.00. Therefore the cost of the creep feed consumed must be less than the $1.00 estimated value of each pound gained.

Different ranching operations will come to different conclusions about the value of creep feeding. In fact, different conclusions may apply to different groups of cows within the same herd. Creep feeding may be more beneficial to calves from thin, young cows and less efficient to calves reared by mature cows that are in better body condition and producing more milk.

Cattle Feeders Running Out of Magic Tricks

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

The latest USDA Cattle on Feed report indicated that April feedlot placements were down 15 percent from last year. Month to month swings in feedlot placements and marketings are common and any one month does necessarily indicate a trend. However, it is likely that smaller feeder supplies have finally caught up with feedlots and placements are expected to be reduced in the coming months with feedlot inventories declining as we move through the remainder of the year.

Feedlots have seemingly defied the odds by maintaining feedlot placements for several months despite ever tighter feeder supplies. A variety of factors have contributed to the timing of feedlot placements in recent months. What is happening now would likely have happened in 2011 were it not for the drought forced sales of cattle last summer and fall. Even the April placement numbers were likely supported by better than expected wheat pasture that allowed more grazeout this spring. However, wheat pasture, like most forages, was ahead of schedule this spring so many grazeout cattle that would be more

typically marketed in May likely were marketed in April. Feedlot placements in the coming months will likely continue to be below year earlier levels. Given generally good current forages conditions in most stocker regions, there will be seasonal availability of early intensive stockers from the Flint Hills/Osage region in July and season-long stockers from other regions in the fall, but overall feeder cattle numbers will be reduced. The number could be reduced further if heifer retention gains momentum this summer.

Larger numbers of Mexican feeder cattle placed directly in feedlots last year also helped to maintain feedlot inventories. Imports of Mexican feeder cattle remain well above year ago levels so far this year as severe drought condition persist across the northern half of Mexico. The current pace of Mexican cattle imports is unlikely to continue for the remainder of the year. Mexican herd liquidation will slow once cattle supplies are exhausted. Although the timing is uncertain, the numbers of Mexican cattle imports will drop significantly for an extended period of time given the depth of herd liquidation currently underway in Mexico.

The complexities and dynamics of the cattle industry never cease to amaze me. Record feeder cattle prices, combined with drought impacts and other factors have helped the feedlot industry wring out the maximum number of feeder cattle over the last several months in order to maintain feedlot inventories. Although it is hard to verify with any data, it seems that the pipeline of feeder cattle typically out in the country has been pulled down to the lowest level in a great many years. Even veal calf slaughter has been reduced to minimal levels as more dairy calves are channeled into feeder markets. The ability to pull cattle forward is impressive and has supported feedlot inventories for many months. But there is a limit and I believe we have exhausted all the tricks to find any more feeder cattle in the short run out of a smaller overall feeder supply.