Creep Grazing Calves to Improve Health & Performance

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Calving season in the northern Great Plains can be the best of times and it can be the worst of times – to quote Charles Dickens. Calving time represents the hope of spring with new calves frolicking and playing, but it can also represent the despair of winter with extremely cold weather, mud, snow, and a high potential for sickness. Hopelessness associated with a calf scours outbreak can bring caretakers to the brink of insanity trying to treat symptoms and break the infection cycle. We have all been there.

Fortunately, most of us have figured out there really is no treatment for scours. By the time we notice the calf is sick, the infection is over. Most caretakers recognize the best treatment for calf scours is to make sure the calf never gets it in the first place.

Aside from many scours vaccines, general scours management techniques, and the Sandhills Calving System, all important tools in the calf scours portfolio, one method I have found valuable is creep grazing. Creep grazing is not a new concept; however, the application of creep grazing in calving and wintering yards may be a fresh perspective on an old idea. Most of the North Central Region calve in lots, close to a barn or other structure with water, electricity, and restraining facilities. These lots are generally full of manure, mud, and filth by spring calving time. As a result, new calves have no choice but to seek shelter and warmth amongst the throng of wet, filthy cows gathered around any scrap of available, manure-covered bedding and to suckle from feces-encrusted udders.

This scenario plays out in nearly every beef cow calving yard in this region, but avoiding it can be relatively simple. Providing a creep area for calves and restricting cow access gives calves a clean space away from mud, manure, and crowding around cows. Additionally, calves can start consuming forage as early as 45 days of age and most can be weaned at 90 days. Therefore, creep grazing using forage is the preferred method of feeding as opposed to creep feeding using a concentrate feed. Forage consumption at this stage of development is important for the calf in terms of biological rumen and psychological behavior development. As a result, incorporating the concept of creep grazing will entice calves to use the creep area. The creep grazing area should provide at least 50 ft^2 of space per calf in a calving or wintering lot. Approximately one third of the total creep space should be dedicated to bedding and shelter, one third to feeding, and one third to a loafing area where calves can spend time without soiling their bedding. High-quality feed is the enticement for calves to use this area. Providing a very fine-stemmed and leafy grass hay or grass/alfalfa mix with at least 15% crude protein and at least 65% total digestible nutrients is a key component in making a creep grazing setup effective. The forage can be long-stemmed or ground and be fed in bale feeders or bunks. Adding a little concentrate feed containing molasses will help attract calves and get them started on roughage. Once the snow melts, giving calves access to an adjacent pasture or grassy area where they can graze grass can be an extremely important method of maintaining vigorous, healthy calves prior to spring turnout.

Creep grazing will not likely result in significant increases in calf gains unless cow milk production is inadequate, but the real value is mitigation of exposure to scours-causing agents in calving and wintering lots and preparation for turn-out on pasture.