

Reviewing spring-born suckled calf feeding strategies

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Debby Brown is a vet, nutritionist and ruminant specialist. Here she reflects on spring-born suckled calf feeding strategies and some of the benefits on offer.

Creep feeding spring-born suckled calves is always an interesting discussion on farm. I often find myself travelling around fields looking at cows and calves and advising on the time to start creep feeding, the format of the creep feed and the ingredients to include.



Over the past few years I have investigated a number of different systems and it's true that each farm and each year will be different. I have therefore tried to put science and logic behind the options before trying them on farm.

Case study: Current practices

One farm I have worked with in the past brought their cows inside in the autumn at a body condition score of 4+, and then rationed them through the winter to encourage weight loss down to a body condition score of 2.5, with the aim of reducing calving difficulties.

Unfortunately, this has detrimentally affected suckler cow performance, with cows often producing lower quantities of milk, and colostrum being of poorer quality. Once turned out in the spring, the cows put condition back on, however, calves have relied heavily on creep feed to maintain growth.

Due to the substantial weight loss of the cow through the winter months, fertility is affected, with calving the following year being extended. This makes weaning time complicated and feeding and growth inconsistent.

Recommendations

Cows:

Last winter the cows were less fat at weaning and fed a slightly better ration once dry. The aim of this was to allow some condition loss, but to ensure it was no more than one body condition score.

Cows were also provided with extra feed for the ten days prior to calving. This ensured the calves had a better start in life, with cows giving more milk whilst they were out at grass.

Calves:

In the past, creep feed was offered from May onwards. However, this was expensive and although it helped calf growth, it negatively impacted on the cow, leading to them getting fatter and increasing the risk of calving issues and poorer fertility going forward.

As this year has been so good for grass growing, we have not offered creep until September, which is at least six weeks before weaning. The creep being offered now will help to extend the grazing season, maintain energy and protein supply to the calves to optimise growth, and prepare them for weaning.

Creep ration:

I have also looked at the benefits of using either blends or compounds for creep feeding. It seems that both will work well as long as the ingredients are good quality.

The main disadvantage of feeding a blend is that the components can separate out, leading to some calves consuming better ingredients than others. In contrast, a compound ensures all calves get the same ingredients in every mouthful and this should optimise growth.

It is important to remember that at this stage of the calf's life, feed efficiency is high, and that the aim is for frame growth as well as muscle deposition. This highlights the fact that protein supply is important. Starch is also valuable to encourage rumen development.

Summary

These principles have had a great effect on the case study farm, with calves weighing more at the time of sale than they have done previously.