K-State beef cattle experts discuss the pros and cons of offering feed prior to weaning

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Just as babies are first introduced to solid foods in their diets while still relying on milk as their primary nutrient source, young calves in some beef operations are offered feed prior to being weaned from the cow, said the beef cattle experts at Kansas State University’s Beef Cattle Institute.

Speaking on a recent Cattle Chat podcast, veterinarians Bob Larson, Brian Lubbers and Brad White visited with nutritionist Phillip Lancaster and guest Tyler Melroe, nutritionist with Hubbard Feeds, a division of Alltech, about the pros and cons of creep feeding, a term that refers to offering young calves feed prior to being weaned from their mother.

“There are three primary feed sources for calves — milk, grass and feed. Young calves will always prefer milk over all other options,” Lancaster said.

Nonetheless, the group agreed that there are situations in which it makes sense to offer young calves creep feed.

“If you have calves with high-growth genetics, they may need the additional energy that creep feed can provide to reach the targeted goal for weaning weight,” Melroe said.

Creep feeding also provides an opportunity to deliver a supplement that will address some health issues such as coccidiosis, in which calves experience intestinal issues. Coccidiostats can be offered in the feed under the guidance of a veterinarian or nutritionist.

“The short-term delivery of medications can come through the creep feed if you are dealing with an outbreak of coccidiosis in the pasture,” Lubbers said.
Larson said there are several questions to ask when deciding whether to use creep feed as a management strategy.

“What is your marketing endpoint? What are the genetics of the herd? What is the weight gain that the calves need to achieve? What is the local availability of the creep feed? All these answers will impact the decision on whether or not to creep feed,” Larson said.

Melroe also advised producers to consider the size of the pasture when making this decision.

“If the pasture that the calves are out on is too big, they may not even find the creep feeder,” Melroe said. “There are a lot of limitations to this strategy.”

White said producers need to look at the availability of the feedstuffs when coming up with a creep feeding plan.

“If feedstuffs are in short supply, that is going to drive the price up and impact the cost of gain,” White said. “I encourage producers to do the math and see if it makes financial sense for their operation.”

To hear the full discussion on this topic, go to the Cattle Chat podcast online.

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Story by:
Lisa Moser
785-532-2010
lmoser@ksu.edu

More information:
Phillip Lancaster
785-532-6323
palancaster@vet.k-state.edu

Bob Larson
785-532-4257
rlarson@vet.k-state.edu

Brian Lubbers
785-532-4012
blubbers@ksu.edu

Brad White
785-532-4243
bwhite@vet.k-state.edu