
FEEDING MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCKLING CALVES DURING DROUGHT

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What can cow-calf producers do with suckling calves during drought and limited feed supply? With limited feed supplies, performance of the calves and subsequently market weight and appearance of the calves will be reduced.

Cow-calf producers can ride it out or do nothing, creep feed calves, early wean calves or market the calves. Each of these practices are worthy of consideration during drought.

1. **Ride it out.** Do nothing and let nature take its course. This will result in reduced gain of the calves and subsequently market weight. Calves will also lose condition and develop rough hair coats, all of which will contribute to a reduced market price. It will eventually rain and fescue and crab grass will come on in the late summer and early fall and make some feed

Another big problem with doing nothing is the loss in condition of brood cows as a result of the calves nursing. Cows that go into winter in poor condition will continue to lose condition after calving and will experience reduced rebreeding performance.

2. **Creep feed calves.** Creep feeding can be either free-choice or limited. The goal is the same, to maintain growth and increase market weight.

Limited creep feed is generally done with cottonseed meal or soybean meal.

Oklahoma State work showed that calves should consume about 1.0 lb. per day which

can be accomplished by adding salt to the mix at about 3 to 8 percent. The salt may need to be adjusted to get the desired intake.

Creep feeding will not reduce the stress of the nursing calves. Early weaning of calves will reduce stress. Placing the calves in a dry lot for feeding may be more economical.

3. **Early wean calves and feed them.** Early weaning of the calves will reduce grazing pressure on the pasture as well as reduce the stress from the nursing calves on the brood cows. This would help get the cows in better condition as they go into the winter. This would be a plus for 2 to 3 year olds and old cows. The best way to handle the calves would be to retain ownership and feed them. This will be an efficient management practice. Calves will gain rapidly and efficiently and it adds some flexibility to marketing.

Rations moderate in energy, 60 to 65 percent TDN, and 12 to 13 percent crude protein with a roughage level of 25 to 35 percent should be adequate for weaned calves. Urea and other NPN sources should not be used as protein sources in these rations. Calves can be limit fed or provided a ration that contains salt to limit consumption to the desired level. The desired level would be that to produce the desired weight and condition at marketing. Be careful and do not allow calves to develop too much condition as they could be discriminated against in price at marketing.

The greatest problem associated with early weaning is the management of calves. To do early weaning, separate, well-fenced lots or pastures will be required. Extra labor and feed bunks will be needed.

4. **Selectively market calves.** If marketing of calves is to be considered, develop a planned program. Heavier calves that are carrying some condition should be the first ones to be sold. Younger, lighter weight calves would eat less feed and be more efficient in their gain than older, heavier calves and could probably be backgrounded and marketed at a later date.

There are several integrated approaches that can be used to “get through” problems created by drought. Considering other feed alternatives, purchasing feed, cow culling, early weaning, crop feeding, and marketing cows and calves are a few.