The previous two articles in this column discussed conventional and limited creep feeding of nursing calves with standard feed grain, medium-protein creep supplements. Conventional creep feeding that allows calves free-choice access to creep supplement for several months before weaning was found to be uneconomical. The cost of creep feed consumed, which can exceed five pounds per calf per day, outweighs the returns in increased calf gain. The possible exception is creep feeding calves nursing first-calf heifers or all calves during a drought period. Cows, as well as calves, benefit from creep-fed calves in these situations.

Limited creep feeding, evaluated by Dr. Joe Crockett and the author in the 1970's, is a practice that offers calves a grain-based creep feed only a few weeks before weaning. An average feed intake of less than one pound of creep feed per calf per day minimizes cost. However, this small amount of creep feed teaches calves to eat before weaning, and results in better gains and fewer health problems of calves after weaning. Most Florida cattlemen market and ship their calves at weaning and would not benefit from limited creep feeding.

Another concept of creep feeding nursing calves was evaluated by researchers in Oklahoma in the 1980's. It involves a high-protein creep supplement like cottonseed meal, with 5 to 10% salt added to limit intake of creep supplement to one pound or less per calf per day. This creep supplement is offered from 2 to 4 months prior to weaning.

In four Oklahoma trials, nursing calves fed a cottonseed meal, salt-limited creep feed consumed an average of 0.72 pounds of creep feed per calf per day. These calves gained 0.27 pounds more per day than calves not offered creep feed. On today's market, a $7.20 investment in a high-protein, salt-limited creep
feed would return $24.30 more calf when sold at weaning.

Dr. Bill Kunkle, Sid Sumner, Pat Hogue and Ed Jennings conducted five trials in the 1990's in south Florida to confirm the response of nursing calves to high-protein, salt-limiting creep feed. Cottonseed meal with 8% salt was creep fed for an average of 54 days. Calves fed creep feed ate an average of 0.68 pounds of creep feed per calf daily, and averaged 0.31 pounds per day more gain than calves not fed creep feed. On today's market a $6.80 investment in a high-protein, salt-limited creep feed would return $27.90 more calf when sold at weaning.

Reviewing the three articles published on creep feeding, there are two practices that will return dollars to the cow-calf enterprise. Short term creep feeding of calves with a high-energy creep supplement 2 to 3 weeks before weaning will return dividends to cattlemen who retain ownership of calves after weaning. Creep feeding nursing calves with a high-protein, salt-limited supplement for 2 to 4 months before weaning will provide cost efficient gains before weaning, and probably benefit creep-fed calves after weaning.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate