



Creep Grazing for Suckling Calves - A Pasture Management Practice¹

C. G. Chambliss and D. E. Mayo²

Selling additional pounds of calf is a desirable objective in any beef cattle enterprise. One way to do this in a cow-calf operation is through creep grazing. Creep grazing puts additional pounds on nursing calves. When weaned, creep grazed calves may weigh 30 to 50 pounds more per calf than those calves that have not had creep grazing available to them.

The concept of creep grazing is based on the fact that the nutritional requirements of suckling calves are much higher than those of cows. Calves creep grazing on a high quality forage that provides high intake of digestible energy and protein make extra growth while the cows are grazing lower quality pasture.

Some producers creep feed calves, which has been very profitable when calf prices are high. By developing creep pastures, labor associated with feeding can be greatly reduced and still have a similar affect.

The Creep Pasture

Permanent pastures in Florida are generally nutritionally adequate for pregnant and lactating beef cows, but are low-to-marginal for rapidly growing calves. Thus, it would be desirable to provide the calves with a more nutritious forage if possible. This can be done by fencing off a small part of the herd pasture and planting it to a high quality forage. This area is called the *creep pasture*. Calves are allowed to graze the creep pasture via special access. The special access or gate allows the calves to pass through but restrains the cows.

The Calf

Although calves may start grazing at two months, they will not utilize a significant amount of forage for weight gain until they are 3 to 4 months old. They will continue to use increasing amounts of forage as they grow older. For the best gains the creep pasture should be available for limited grazing when the oldest calves in the herd are 3 to 4 months old. Once creep grazing is started, it should be continued until the calves are weaned. Creep grazing

1. This document is SS-AGR-211, one of a series of the Agronomy Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date February 2004. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. C.G. Chambliss, Associate Professor, Agronomy Department; D. E. Mayo, Extension Agent II--Jackson County, Marianna, FL; Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32610.

The use of trade names in this publication is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. UF/IFAS does not guarantee or warranty the products named, and references to them in this publication does not signify our approval to the exclusion of other products of suitable composition.

can be provided for both spring calves as well as fall calves. Fall calves would graze cool-season forages and spring calves warm-season forages.

What Plants to Use?

Legumes or grasses can be used in creep pastures. Producers should select adapted forages that are known to be high in digestibility and protein. Two warm-season legumes that may fit into creep grazing programs are perennial peanut, adapted to well-drained soils, and *Aeschynomene americana*, adapted to poorly drained soils. *Aeschynomene* has given good results in Florida research studies (Table 1).

Other forages that could be used in the warm season are alyceclover, hairy indigo, Savanna stylo and pearl millet. The warm-season annual legumes are usually ready for grazing 6 to 8 weeks after planting and continue to grow into September. An early spring planting of pearl millet will provide forage from spring into the fall. Thus, pearl millet could be used to start or finish a creep grazing program where most of the creep pasture is planted to a legume.

Table 1. Effect of Creep Grazing Treatments on Average Daily Gain (ADG) of Calves.

| Creep Treatments | ADG (LBS) |
|--|-----------|
| Aeschynomene | 1.98 |
| Hairy Indigo | 1.80 |
| Tifleaf 1, Pearl millet | 1.80 |
| Control (no creep) | 1.50 |
| Source: W. R. Ocumpaugh & G. A. Dusi. 1979. Gainesville, FL. | |

If fall calves are 3 to 4 months old in January or February, then the cool-season annual grasses (ryegrass, small grains), as well as alfalfa, white clover and other adapted cool-season legumes (crimson, red, and arrowleaf clover) can be used in creep pastures.

Managing the Creep Pasture

The size of the creep pasture will depend on the stocking rate and the productivity of the forages used. As a rule of thumb, take 10 percent of the herd

pasture and put it into a creep pasture for aeschynomene and other legumes. One acre will usually be sufficient for 6 calves. Creep pastures containing nitrogen-fertilized grasses such as pearl millet may require less area. If excess creep forage develops, the cow herd can be permitted to graze it.

In pasture systems where cattle are rotated across two or more pastures, each herd pasture should have a creep pasture available to it. One creep pasture, if strategically located, may be grazed from two or more herd pastures (Figure 1).

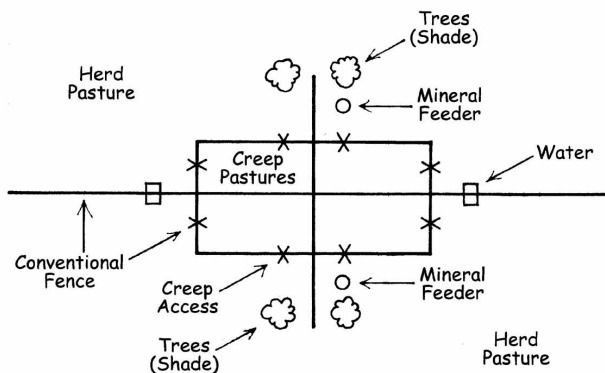


Figure 1. Layout of a creep grazing management system.

When choosing a site for the creep pasture many factors must be considered. If annuals need to be planted each year, then the land must be farmable on a timely basis. The site must be compatible with the forage you plan to grow.

Calves must learn to go in and out of the creep pasture. It is helpful to locate the creep pasture and/or creep access in an area where the cows congregate. This can be accomplished by locating the creep access near water, salt, minerals and/or shade, or the water trough and/or mineral feeder needs to be moved near the creep access. Calves can be initially introduced to the creep pasture by moving the entire herd into the creep for a short period of time each day over a 3 or 4 day period. Calves will learn to use the creep pasture if there is more forage available and if it is more palatable than that in the herd pasture. If plenty of palatable, high quality forage is available for the calves in the herd pastures, then they will have less of a tendency to use the creep pasture. If the herd pasture is low quality and/or heavily stocked, then calves should make profitable use of creep grazing.

Creep grazing gives the greatest response when the quantity and/or quality of forage in the herd pasture is relatively low. As bahiagrass and other perennial pasture grasses mature, their digestibility and protein level decrease. In hot weather these grasses mature rapidly, thus by mid-to-late summer the quality of bahiagrass pasture containing no legume is usually low. At this time, high quality forage will produce an increase in calf weight. If the herd pasture contains legumes or if the quality and quantity of forage is just as great as what is contained in the creep pasture, then, no increase in calf weight can be expected from the creep pasture. Therefore, herd pastures containing an adequate amount of *Aeschynomene americana* or white clover would not need an adjacent creep pasture. An example of where a creep grazing pasture would most likely increase calf weight is when bahiagrass pasture is harvested for seed. The bahiagrass is deliberately allowed to mature in order to produce seed, thus when cattle are moved into these pastures after seed harvest, the forage is low in quality.

Construction of a Creep Access

An access to the creep pasture may be placed in a gate opening of a conventional fence by opening the gate and setting a post so that there is 17 to 18 inches between the new post and the original latch post. Then tie the gate to the new post and nail a brace from the new post to the latch post at 36 to 48 inches above the ground. The gate could be opened or removed and replaced with a single electric wire to provide the creep access. A specially constructed creep gate (panel) could be used to replace the original gate or a simple opening in the fence may be constructed with posts. The creep opening should be 17 to 18 inches wide and 36 to 48 inches high (height above ground) (Figures 2 and 3). Additional information on the construction of a creep gate can be found at the following web site:

<http://www.cerc.colostate.edu/Blueprints/Pasturerange.htm>. There should be more than one access into the creep pasture if possible.

Portions of a large herd pasture may be economically fenced off and planted to a creep forage by using a single wire electric fence placed at a height of 36 to 48 inches (Figures 4, 5 and 6). High tensile

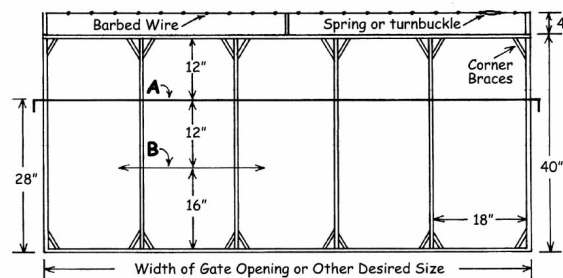


Figure 2. Specially constructed adjustable creep gate. (Constructed from oil well sucker rod and other suitable material.) A. Adjustment rod elevated--for small calves. B. Adjustment rod closes gate to all livestock passage. (U-shaped brackets hold adjustment rods in place.)

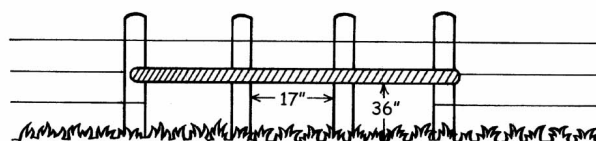


Figure 3. Simple post arrangement in conventional fence.

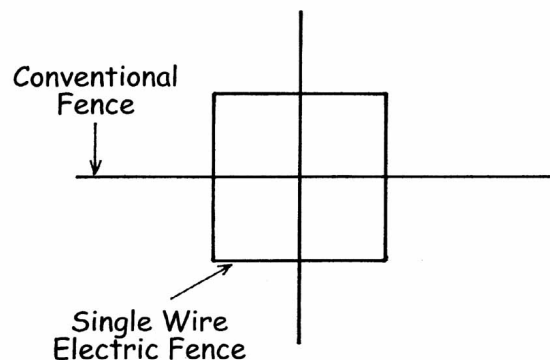


Figure 4.

smooth wire can be used and will require minimum maintenance as compared to the lightweight temporary type of electric fencing wire. Where electric current is not available, solar powered electric fences can be used. Calves can walk under the wire at any point and no special creep opening will be needed.

If a producer does not desire to develop separate creep pastures, some advantage may be gained by constructing creep access to each herd pasture so that calves can graze ahead of the mature cows. This allows the calves to select the highest quality forage before the mature cows have an opportunity to graze it.

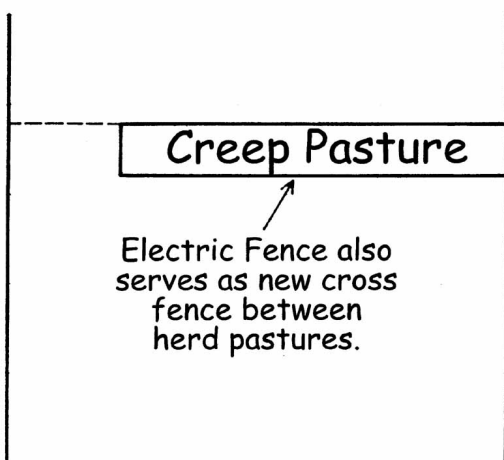


Figure 5.

Before setting up a creep pasture a producer should determine what it will cost and compare the cost to expected increase in weight gain of calves and the value of the increased weight.

Creep grazing may not work for all herds. Cows that are heavy milkers may provide their calves with all of the energy that they can use and no additional gain will result from creep grazing.

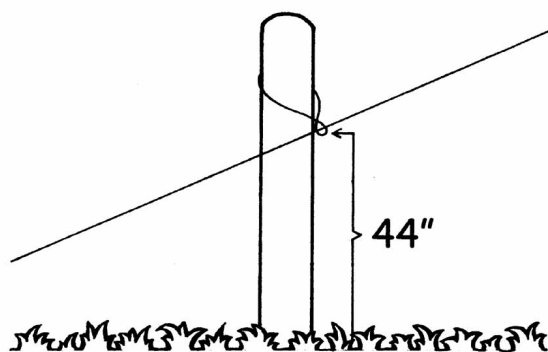


Figure 6. Single wire electric fence.

Summary

Creep grazing is a management practice for economically increasing the weaning weight of calves. To successfully use this practice:

1. Establish creep pastures in locations that will be used by the calves.
2. Use adapted high quality forages in the creep pastures.
3. Induce calves to use the creep pasture by placing mineral feeders, water, and/or shade near the creep access.
4. Have creep grazing available by the time the oldest calves in the herd are 3 to 4 months old.
5. The creep access or opening through which the calf passes should be 17 to 18 inches wide and 36 to 48 inches high.