

SPECIAL SUCKLER SERIES

WINNING THE WEANING CHALLENGE

Livestock editor Justin McCarthy looks at how to ensure you get the maximum return out of creep feeding calves

THIS WEEK

Feeding the right ration including meal feeding levels for bulls and heifers, price survey and creep feeding methods.

Week 3

Various methods of weaning including weaning regulations.

Week 4

Completing the pre & post weaning forms including the Irish Farmers Journal special weaning calculator.

Week 5

Managing the calf post weaning and ensuring calf remains healthy up until selling.

Week 6

Managing the cow post weaning including reducing feed costs, body condition scoring and cow health.



Creep feeding in advance of weaning

This week, we will be looking at how to ensure you get the maximum return out of creep feeding calves. It is important to remember that meal feeding pre and post weaning is a key part of Suckler Cow Welfare Scheme (SCWS).

The conditions of the scheme state that calves must be consuming 1kg of meal for four weeks before weaning and for two weeks after weaning. You are not required to feed meals ad-lib nor are you required to feed expensive creep rations.

In the terms and conditions of the SCWS, it states that meal shall be of the appropriate quality and standard as required for calves at weaning time. This does not mean that you have to go out and buy the most expensive weaning crunch on the market. It is, therefore, important

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that you plan your weaning, especially if you are targeting stock for a special show and sale. Meals must be introduced six weeks prior to the date of the sale.

You are also required to record the date of meal feeding on the pre-weaning form. This form must be returned within seven days of the start of meal feeding. For example, if you started meal feeding calves on 2 August, you must return the pre-weaning form for this group of calves before 9 August. Failure to do so could result in you losing out on €40 per calf payment.

I will be covering the completion of the pre and post weaning forms in more detail in week four.

THE RIGHT RATION

Figure 1 outlines various feeding regimes, depending on the type of calves you are feeding and the market you are aiming your stock at.

When feeding good quality bull calves for either the live export market or the higher end of the domestic market, you will get a good return from feeding meals ad-lib for eight to 10 weeks. However, in the case of plainer quality bulls or early maturing breeds, such as Angus or Hereford, meals should be fed at 1kg to 2kg per day.

The same applied for heifers.

With the exception of very well muscled heifers, meal should be fed at a rate of 1kg to 2kg per day. For the more muscular heifers, this could be increased to 3kg.

On farms where progeny from the suckler herd are carried through to beef or even over the first winter, there is little point in feeding heavy meals during weaning. About 1kg to 2kg per day is adequate for these animals, irrespective of quality.

The level of meal feeding will have an influence on the type of ration you require. For example, when feeding ad-lib you need a well balanced ration of between 14% to 16% protein. However, when feeding low levels, such as 1kg per day, a standard beef mix is more than adequate. Table 1 details suitable type rations.

The most efficient way of increasing weaning weight and output value is to ensure calves have an adequate supply of good quality grass over the next eight to 10 weeks.

It is essential that a few paddocks are fertilized and closed up in August to ensure calves have access to good quality grass from weaning through until sale or housing. Where possible, select paddocks that are well sheltered, close to the yard and have adequate grass.

Feeding for profit



Weanlings being held over the winter

Meal feeding levels: 1-2kg per day depending on grass quality and weather

On suckler to beef farms where weanlings are being carried through the winter there is little point in pumping meals into calves at weaning. On these farms the focus should be on making sure there is an adequate supply of grass on the farm to carry weanlings through until housing. During the weaning process both bull and heifer calves should be fed 1kg per day of a standard 12-14% ration for the 42-day period required under the SCWS scheme. Where grass supplies are tight and weather conditions are poor this should be increased to 2kg per day and maintained right through until housing. Certainly there is no justification on a suckler to beef farm for introducing a creep feeder and feeding meals ad-lib. The only exception would be where bull calves are intended for finishing out of the shed at 14-16 months.

Table 1: Suitable type rations depending on feeding levels

Feeding level (daily)	Typical mix
1kg	70% rolled barley and 30% citrus pulp
2-3kg	60% rolled barley, 30% citrus pulp and 10% maize distillers
Ad-lib	50% rolled barley, 25% citrus pulp, 25% maize distillers or 50% rolled barley, 35% citrus pulp and 15% soya bean meal

Where feeding bulls and heifers the ad-lib rations are suitable for feeding at the lower rates.

Methods of feeding meals to calves

THERE are many different options of feeding meals to calves that are still suckling the cow. The simplest method is the creep feeder.

These range in size from mobile units that hold between 0.5 tonnes and 6 tonnes of meal to smaller units that you can hang off a gate. However, the creep feeder only facilitates the feeding of meals ad-lib and is not suitable for heifers or plainer quality bulls.

A trough in conjunction with a creep gate works extremely well and has the added bonus of encouraging calves to graze ahead of the cows.

Where creep grazing is not possible, some farmers will simply run a strand of electric wire across the corner of the field that the cows and calves are grazing. The wire will be raised so the calves can get access to the trough while still restricting the cows.

In most cases, you will have to stand at the wire while the calves are feeding to prevent any cows limbo dancing underneath. However, it will only take a few minutes for calves to clean the trough and you can use this time to do the herding.



Farmers need to be very careful not to overfeed heifers. Neither the live export market nor the domestic market want heifers with heavy fat deposits around the tailhead. Only exceptionally well-muscled heifers should be fed above 2kg per day.