

Calving Ease

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Calf Starter Grain Intake Managed or Neglected?

- **You cannot manage what you do not measure!**
- **Average consumption: Is it a Useful Number?**
- **What are our age-dependent intake goals?**
- **What does it take to do a good job of managing grain intake?**

You cannot manage what you do not measure!

“Okay, no poop in bucket, she’s fine.” Has the bucket been one-half full since the day she when into her pen? It is easy to fall into the trap of filling buckets compared to “feeding” grain. If the person feeding grain is observing the bucket contents (licked clean, little in bottom, nothing eaten since yesterday) there should be a quick mental calculation of (1) how much has she eaten since yesterday, (2) how much does she normally eat, and (3) how much more grain do I need to add.

On one hand, the calf care person can go along and see that all the grain buckets are one-half full – no mental measuring going on at all. No measurement; no management.

On the other hand, knowing the calf’s stage of development, current milk ration and grain intake pattern it is possible to manage feeding calf starter grain.

Average consumption: Is it a Useful Number?

When we are pressed for time, it is easy to fall into the trap of “averages.” For example, with an intensive milk feeding program, “on the average” calves should be eating about one cup of calf starter grain by 21 days. Well, Kazzie and Sam have been there. There are calves in this milk ration that start eating grain at 10 days. In contrast, there are calves that dawdle around to 28 days without eating any grain. Expect wide variation among calves, especially at this young age.

How to define “low” calf starter grain intake?

We have excellent research that links milk/milk replacer intake volume to when calves begin to eat calf starter grain. Now that we have explained why one should be cautious when using “averages” we will give you some “average” ages when to expect calves to begin eating grain.

The factors that come into play when coming up with these ages are: (1) daily milk ration, (2) environmental temperature (winter vs. summer), (3) palatability of calf starter grain, and (4) free-choice water availability.

- Hungry calves (low milk ration, winter) with a low-fines textured starter with f-c water will often begin nibbling at starter at one week of age.
- Calves on an intensive milk-feeding program in the summer do not have hunger to drive them into the grain bucket at an early age. It is common for them to begin nibbling at grain only somewhere toward the end of week two or into the third week of age.
- Our recommended goal before stopping milk feeding is to have them (1) regularly eating grain for three weeks and (2) consuming 4.5 to 5.5 pounds of grain daily [more in cold weather].

What does it take to do a good job of managing grain intake?

- **Facilities and equipment**

You cannot do a good job of feeding water without water pails. The same goes for grain, too. Whether you have 1, 10, 100 or 1,000 calves every calf needs a water and grain pail. We always needed some extras, too. Sam always graduated scratched-up water pails to become water pails.

When you have to carry all the grain in buckets, it is low on capital expense but high on labor expense (and hard on one's back). Efficient ways to both store and distribute grain can cut labor hours and allow more time to observe consumption of individual and groups of calves.

- **Desire to give a little extra attention to promote optimum growth for all calves.**

There is a big difference between “feeding grain” and “managing grain.” Both Kazzie and Sam had relief calfcare persons that just never understood the concept of feeding the appropriate amount of grain depending on the age and eating habits of calves. It seemed like whenever we had a day off the next day nearly every grain pail would be ½ full - regardless of the age of the calf!!! What a lot of extra work, dumping pails to get every calf back on her regular grain-feeding schedule.

Regardless of the age at which one starts feeding grain to calves, it is always true that calves have to learn to eat grain. We are convinced that they learn better when started with just a handful of grain (just covers the bottom of the pail) than shoving a ½ full pail in front of the newborn naïve calf.

Sam was asked one time how he remembered how much grain each calf consumed every day. His answer was that he just remembered the exceptions. In his experience, groups of calves the same age usually ate very similar amounts daily. It was the exceptions that needed his attention. The “laggards” needed to be fed less than their friends – close to appetite. At 6 to 8 weeks, the “gangbusters” might need to have their pail topped off at the end of afternoon feeding.

Thanks to Attica Veterinary Associates, P.C. for sponsoring this issue of the calf management newsletter.

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Have you visited the “Calves with Sam” blog for snips of calf news?