

Feeding a Small Number of Calves for the Freezer or Club Calf Project

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Feeding one to four or five calves for the freezer or for a Club Calf Project can be an interesting and rewarding experience, but also takes work, close attention to detail and a willingness to maintain a regular feeding schedule.

The goal of the feeding program is to obtain a calf that yields a carcass with good eating characteristics (tenderness and taste) that is adequate in lean meat yield to make it a worthwhile investment while avoiding the addition of too much fat. The following guidelines are designed to do this.

Preparation

Select a feeding area that is clean, well-drained and has ready access to clean water. Each calf needs an individual feeding tub or enough space (at least two feet) in a trough for it to consume its feed allotment without interference from other calves. Fencing should be adequate to keep calves confined and should be free of protrusions. In general, allow at least 250 square feet of space for each animal. Shelter should be available for animals to escape from cold, wet weather and shade must be provided during hot weather months.

Starting on Feed

It has been said, and is probably true, that it is easier to feed a thousand calves than one or two. This may be true in that one or two calves have a tendency to develop “odd” feeding behaviors more than calves in large groups. They may tend to go “off feed” at the beginning of the feeding period and may not finish exactly on schedule.

Two calves are easier to feed than one, three are easier than two, and so on. Lack of competition for feed apparently makes calves a little more complacent about eating.

A number of companies have prepared feed mixtures and / or supplements that are designed for feeding club calves and freezer calves. These are often very suitable feeding programs. It is recommended that labels be followed on these types of feeds.

Have grass hay available for free-choice consumption during to initial feeding period. As concentrate feeding increases, the calves will gradually decrease consumption of hay. Within two to three weeks hay can be removed. See Tables 1 and 2 for details on how to gradually switch to concentrate feeding.

This feeding program is based on using the following feeds:

- Starter Feed - Commercially prepared mixture, typically medicated with antibiotic, 14 to 16% protein and blended to be relatively safe for starting calves on feed.
- Corn - Either purchased or home-grown, can be cracked but is often fed as whole-shelled. Do not use finely ground corn. Should be relatively free of dust and have not evidence of mold or other contamination.
- Protein supplement - Commercial blends often run 32 to 44 percent crude protein. Ingredients can be soybean meal, cottonseed meal or other protein feeds.
- Mineral - Most typically provided free-choice or incorporated into commercial blended feeds.

Table 1. Following is a guideline for starting calves on feed, based on 600 pound calf ¹

Day	Corn (Lbs)	Starter (Lbs) ²	Protein Supplement (Lbs) ²
1 - 4	1.5	4.5	1.0
5 - 8	3.0	3.0	1.0
9 - 12	4.5 to 6.0	1.5	1.5
12 to finish	9.0 at beginning ³	0 - 1.5	1.5

¹For best results, divide these amounts into two feedings per day

²Top-dressed over corn

³Will increase as calf grows, but should typically be maintained in 1.5 to 2.0 % of body weight.

Table 2. Following is a guideline for starting calves on feed, with recommended amounts presented as percent of body weight ^{1,2}

Day	Corn (% of body weight)	Starter (% of body weight) ²	Protein Supplement (Lbs) ³
1 - 4	.25	.75	1.0
5 - 8	.50	.50	1.0
9 - 12	.75	.25	1.5
12 to finish	1.5 to 2.0	0 - .25	1.5

¹This allows calculation of feed amounts for any size calf. For example, if you want to feed corn at 0.5 percent of body weight to a 500 pound calf multiply the math is $500 \times .5 / 100 = 2.5$ lbs

² For best results, divide these amounts into two feedings per day

³Top-dressed over corn

The Finishing Period

The most common questions about the finishing period are related to how long to feed and how to tell when a calf is “finished.”

The calf needs to be fed at least 55 to 65 days to allow the body tissues to rid themselves of the flavors that have accumulated from forage. Another way of considering it is that this the minimum amount of time to start getting the desirable “corn-fed” flavor.

To achieve “choice” status, it is likely that the calves will need to be fed at least 90 to 110 days. If calves are started at about 600 to 800 pounds and gain at a suitable 3.0 - 3.5 pounds per day, this will put them in the 900 to 1200 pound weight range.

As calves finish, they start to accumulate fat that can be visually assessed, particularly around the tail-head, over the ribs and through the brisket area.

Pointers for Success:

- Make all changes as gradual as possible.
- Keep fresh water available at all times.
- If you miss a feeding, do not “make it up” at next feeding by feeding twice as much. It is much better to keep it at the normal amount, or slightly less, then work back up to the normal amount.

- Feeding twice a day is preferable. Cattle should clean up the amounts fed in less than 30 minutes. If calves go “off-feed,” it may be necessary to back up in the feeding program by feeding less and working back up.
- If feed is not cleaned up by the next feeding, remove it so that it won’t spoil and cause sickness or consumption problems.

Weight / Volume Conversions

It is always better to measure feed by weight. Volume estimates are prone to error. Novice feeders, especially, should avoid making feed estimates by volume. Table 3 contains common weight / volume conversion estimates simply because some people do not have scales available at all times and an informed weight estimate is better than a wild guess.

Table 3. Weight volume conversions

Feed	Lb per quart	Lb per gallon
Corn, Shelled	1.8	7.2
Corn, Cracked	1.6	6.4
Soybean meal	1.5	6.0
Cottonseed meal	1.5	6.0