Extension Service
West Virginia University

Creep Grazing[1]

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Creep grazing is a form of grazing in which smaller animals are allowed to go (creep) from one pasture to another through openings in a fence. The openings are small enough to restrict the passage of larger animals to the creep pasture. Creep grazing can be used to give calves access to quality pasture while restricting cows to inferior pasture. It can also be used to allow lambs access to quality pasture while restricting cattle.

The rationale for creep grazing is based on the fact that (1) different ages and sizes of livestock have different nutritional requirements, and (2) the quantity and quality of forage are not uniform during the pasture season. When animals having different nutritional requirements are grazed together, some animals are either overfed or underfed depending on pasture conditions. If pastures are managed to provide forage suited to animals with the lower nutritional requirements, then animals having higher requirements do not receive adequate nutrition for maximum performance. If pastures are managed to provide forage for animals with the higher nutritional requirements, then animals with lower requirements have more feed than needed and make poor use of the extra feed in economic terms. In West Virginia, it is common to manage pastures in such a way that forage accumulates in May and June when forage production is at a peak. The excess forage is used by grazing animals later in the season when forage consumption exceeds forage production. Creep grazing used in combination with the above pasture management can increase livestock gains and in some cases livestock numbers.

The benefits of creep grazing depend on individual situations. Research at West Virginia University, using a bluegrass-white clover creep area for calves when cows were grazing tall fescue, resulted in a 0.2-pound per day increase in weight compared with noncreep-grazed calves (Data from experiment of Drs. Bryan and Prigge). This experiment was conducted over a five-month grazing period, which resulted in weight differences of 30 pounds per calf. Research in Louisiana revealed that differences between creep– and noncreep-grazed calves may be as high as 100 pounds per calf. Experiments and demonstrations in Virginia and West Virginia on pastures similar to those occurring in much of West Virginia have indicated that calves do respond to creep grazing. Weight gains of 25 to 50 pounds per calf might be a reasonable increase to expect; however, the increase may depend on individual circumstances. The greater the difference in forage quantity and quality between the creep and noncreep pastures, the greater the benefits received from the use of creep grazing.

Situations in which creep grazing would be beneficial exist on nearly all farms occasionally and on many farms each year. In general, the heavier the grazing pressure, the greater the potential benefits from creep grazing. Under West Virginia farm situations, the most practical fields to use for creep grazing are frequently grass or grass-legume hayfields. When hay is harvested in June, regrowth forage is suitable for grazing by mid-August, the time when calves and lambs are beginning to need extra forage. It is common on many farms for cows and calves to graze aftermath hayfields starting in late August and continuing until calves are marketed or weaned in October. Although this scheme is useful, it does force calves to compete with cows for the better forage. As feed supply diminishes, calves may not get the nutrition they need to make maximum gains. Creep grazing of aftermath meadows would allow grazing to start earlier and continue later and would assure calves the better-quality feed. Research has shown that when cows are restricted to poorer-quality feed in the fall, they may lose up to 10% of their weight without affecting future performance.

[1] Presented at the program Development Workshop, WVU Jackson's Mill, Nov. 18, 1981.

When hayfields are creep grazed, some precautions need to be taken to avoid changes in botanical composition. If grazing starts early and most of the forage is consumed before the anticipated date of frost, there is some chance that tall-growing hay species such as orchardgrass, timothy, and red clover will be replaced in the stand by species that tolerate closer grazing such as bluegrass and white clover. This potential pitfall in creep grazing can be avoided by delaying the initiation of creep grazing until mid-August or later if species composition begins to change, or by imposing only light grazing pressure. Light grazing pressure is needed, especially during summer and early fall, to get good performance from creep grazers without damage to hayfields. Alfalfa fields in general should not be creep grazed. Other legume fields can be grazed if precautions are taken to guard against bloat.

The area required to produce feed for one cow over winter should be adequate to provide creep grazing for one calf. This may mean that more than one meadow will have to be used during the creep-grazing season or the creep-grazing period will have to be modified to utilize available forage without damaging the meadow.

Sheep can be creep grazed with cows using the same area as used for calves. If sheep are to be creep grazed with cows, only weaned lambs should be allowed to creep graze. At the time when creep grazing would be most beneficial to lambs, the ewes' nutritional requirements are low and they would not benefit from high nutritional levels. Ewes grazing with cows could be flushed on creep pastures before the breeding season. It is very difficult to construct a creep area that will allow lambs access to an area and restrict ewes.

In order for calves or sheep to use a creep pasture, the forage in the creep area must be superior to the forage in the noncreep area. The creep pasture openings must also be located where livestock frequently travel or congregate. The ideal situation is to have two parallel pastures with one common fence. With creep gates placed at each end of the creep pasture, calves will graze from one end of the creep area to the other as cows graze the adjacent field. Other field arrangements will work as long as the creep opening is located in a readily accessible area and there is sufficient difference between the forages in the creep and noncreep pastures to attract the animals.

Creep grazing can also be designed as part of a rotational grazing system. In such a case, calves or lambs would be allowed to graze ahead of cows and would always have access to the better-quality forage. Other modifications can be made to suit individual situations.

Creep openings for calves are usually 15 to 18 inches wide and 24 to 18 inches high, depending on the size of the animals to be creep grazed. Creep panels usually are constructed of wood and can be conveniently located in gates. The permanent gate is tied open and the creep panel set in the gate opening and secured to the gateposts.

Creep grazing has the potential to greatly increase profits. It should not be viewed as a substitute for good permanent pasture management but rather as part of a total forage program. Only a small investment of labor and materials is needed to initiate creep grazing. Almost no risk is involved, and potential benefits are good. Creep grazing has a place on many farms in West Virginia.

<u>Check List for Successful Creep Grazing</u>

	YES	NO	
1.	____	____	Is the field to be used for creep grazing adjacent to the area being used to pasture non-creep grazing animals?
2.	____	____	Is there a major difference in forage quantity and/or quality between the two pastures?
3.	____	____	Is there a good fence separating the pastures especially near the creep gate?
4.	____	____	Is the creep gate located where animals frequently congregate or travel?
5.	____	____	Is forage in permanent pastures usually in short supply during late summer and fall?
6.	____	____	Is the area to be creep grazed fenced to keep creep grazers out of other crops or undesired areas?
7.	____	____	Is there sufficient forage to provide feed for the creep grazers throughout the anticipated grazing period
8.	____	____	Is water or mineral feeder near the creep area?
9.	____	____	Is the field such that two or more creep gates can be used on different sides of the field?
10.	____	____	Is the producer willing to devote a little time to building and maintaining a creep gate?

If either question one or two was checked no, then creep grazing will probably not work. If questions one and two were checked yes, but two other, questions were checked no, either extra effort will be required or creep grazing will be of limited success. If more than three questions are checked no, then creep grazing will probably not work.