Forage Management

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Creep Grazing

Many pastures in West Virginia have an abundance of highly nutritious forage for short periods during the grazing season. It is during these periods that maximum growth of lambs and calves is achieved. Creep grazing is a pasture management system that allows the farmer to extend this period of maximum performance by feeding the most nutritious forage to the lambs and calves which have high nutritional requirements.

Areas to be creep grazed must be fenced to restrict large animals and have creep panels constructed in the fence or gateway that allows small animals to enter the area through openings in the creep panel. The creep openings for calves are usually 15 to 18 inches wide and 24 to 38 inches high depending on the size of animals to be creep grazed. The creep panels are usually constructed of wood and located in gate openings. It is nearly impossible to build a panel that can be used to separate ewes and lambs so it is recommended that weaned lambs be the only sheep in an area being creep grazed.

In order for calves and lambs to use a creep pasture the forage in the creep area must be superior to forage in the non-creep area. The greater the difference between forage in the two areas the greater the benefit from creep grazing. An ideal physical arrangement for creep grazing is when the creep area is adjacent to and separated by a common fence from the regular pasture. Creep panels can then be placed at each end of the creep pasture and calves will graze the length of the creep pasture as cows graze outside the creep area. Other field arrangements will work as long as the creep panels are located in areas where animals frequently congregate. Water and salt can sometimes be used to help intice animals to areas where creep openings are located.

On many farms the most practical fields for creep grazing are aftermath grass hayfields. When hay is harvested in June regrowth is usually suitable for grazing by August, the times when calves and lambs will frequently benefit from improved nutrition. The area needed to produce hay for one cow should provide an area adequate to creep graze one calf without damage to grass hay fields. Alfalfa should not be creep grazed.

Only a small investment of labor and materials is needed to initiate creep grazing. It should not be used as a substitute for other good pasture management techniques but as part of a total forage program. It involves almost no risk and can be expected to increase weights by 25 pounds or more per calf in many situations.

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