**CREEP FEEDER LOCATION MAY MATTER MORE THAN PRODUCERS REALIZE**

Every year around this time producers start talking about the value of creep feeding kids and the added benefits gained as a result. Benefits such as increased weaning weights, reduced stress at weaning, and a reduction of metabolic disorders caused by sudden change. In these conversations, much of the focus is ultimately placed on the age of the kids and what feed goes in the feeder. While those details do matter heavily, I would submit more focus should to be placed on creep area design and location instead. Goats are prey animals and as such, will avoid areas that do not provide the sense of safety they desire. To understand proper location though, we must first consider a few factors that affect the movements and habits of all goats.

**Lighting and Shadows:** Great consideration should be given to the overall lighting and corresponding shadows created of any potential creep area location. We saw this in our barn recently. We set up a creep pen in a corner of the barn that was convenient for us to fill the feeder. Unfortunately this corner also had the worst lighting in the barn regardless of the time of day, and shadows were cast over the entrance of the creep area in the mornings and evenings. As one might expect, the kids rarely went into the creep area to eat and were often easily scared when anything moved near the pen that would cast a different or moving shadow at those times. Realizing the creep pen was anything but a success, we set up a second creep pen where the lighting was considerably better. This second area was quickly crowded with kids wanting to eat grain. Being prey animals, goats will perceive most any poorly lit or shadowy place as an area of possible danger. If we create creep pens with this in mind, we can minimize this sense of danger and gain better results. As producers, convenience to fill the feeder often trumps anything else. However, like our example, a less convenient placement with better lighting can increase the likelihood of early intakes in kids.

**Distance:** Any creep area placement should take into consideration the distance from the barn or common mingling area, distance from water sources, and the distance from the feeding areas for the mothers. Kids will not stray far from their mothers especially when young. The further a creep area is placed from the barn or other shelter, the less secure a kid will feel when they visit and the less likely they will be to stay for long. Likewise, the further away water sources are placed in relation to the creep areas, the less kids will visit, return, or eat. If grain or hay for the does is offered at a great distance from the creep area, kids will be unlikely to leave their mother’s side to visit the creep feeder. Instead, they may choose to stay and try eating with their mothers. On our farm, we find the most effective creep areas are often set up near hay feeders. The kids will visit the creep feeder while their mother eats hay and because she is close by, gain a sense of security in the creep area.

**Accessibility:** Many creep areas are built like Fort Knox. As producers, we try so hard to prevent does from gaining access to a creep area that we may unintentionally minimize kid accessibility as well. Not only must kids be able to easily enter and exit the creep area, they must be able to access the feed easily as well. While there are many great creep panels and feeders on the market, there are just as many poorly designed ones. The space needed for a kid to enter and exit a creep area changes as they grow. As such, our entrances and exits must be adjustable as well. In my travels I have often encountered creep areas where kids wear off the hair on their spines due to height issues, or get their hips or shoulders stuck in the in entrances due to width, all in an attempt to control the mothers. Every time this occurs, the kids performance decreases and susceptibility to injury or disease increases. Additionally feeder heights must be adjustable as well. Goats are notorious for trying to stand in feeders, and climb on everything. Feeder heights must be adjusted often to minimize these tendencies. As we keep their feet and manure out of feeders, we can simultaneously reduce disease risks and increase the overall performance of each kid.

Much like real estate, creep areas are all about location, location, location. Shadows and overall lighting, distance from adult feeders or shelter, and accessibility can all affect a prey animal’s willingness to visit. At the end of the day any creep area that kids do not visit or feeder they will not eat out of, will quickly negate any value a producer hopes to gain. It is time to consider more than producer convenience, age of the kids, or feeds to be offered in our creep area planning. In doing so, we may all gain better results from our creep feeding practices.