Are You Ready For Spring Calving?

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Spring calving season is just around the corner, and even though the majority of cattle give birth without assistance, it's always wise to be prepared for those that will need help. When observing pregnant cows for signs of calving, you can divide the process of labor into three general stages. These include the preparatory stage (Stage 1), the fetal expulsion stage (Stage 2) and the cleaning stage (Stage 3). Time intervals and events that occur will vary between each stage as well as vary between individuals.

Stage 1 occurs when cervical dilation and early uterine contractions begin. Cows will begin to show behavioral changes like moving away from the herd, restlessness and off feed. Physical signs include relaxation of the pelvic ligaments indicated by a sunken croup and a raised tail, and the udder will also be enlarged and tight. The presentation of the water bag usually indicates the end of Stage 1 and the beginning of Stage 2.

The second stage of labor can be characterized as the stage in which birth of the calf will occur. During this stage, uterine contractions are intense. The cow would normally lie down and actively be pushing to expel the calf. A short summary of the three stages is shown in the table below.

Research has been conducted to investigate the normal length of Stage 2, indicating the typical amount of time it takes for a cow to lie down and give birth to a calf. USDA researchers recorded calving times of both cows and heifers at the Miles City, Montana research station. They found that once Stage 2 of labor began, cows averaged 23 minutes to lie down and give birth to a calf. Heifers generally took a little longer, averaging about 54 minutes. Therefore, when you are observing a cow in Stage 2 of labor, keep in mind that if **no progress** has been made after 30 minutes, then assistance should be heavily considered. However, if progress is continuing, then be patient and allow nature to take its course.

Stage 3 occurs with the expulsion of the placenta and fetal membranes. This is generally referred to as the cow cleaning. This stage should normally take less than 8 hours. If the cow retains the placenta for longer than 2 days, then contact your veterinarian to get assistance for cleaning the cow. It is important to take proper action during each successive stage of labor to ensure a live calf.

A couple of weeks before the calving season, cows and heifers due to calve should be moved to a smaller pasture where they can be easily observed. Always try to avoid extensive movement after labor has begun. Moving the animal during labor will slow down the labor process because a cow or heifer will stop to examine her new surroundings. It is a good idea to always have proper facilities and equipment close at hand and in working order for use during the calving season. Movement to a maternity stall may be necessary if assistance is required.

It is always easier to deal with calving difficulty during daylight hours opposed to heading out at midnight to pull a calf. One method that has been proven to increase the number of cows that calve during the day is the Konefal method. This technique gets its name from Gus Konefal, a Canadian Hereford breeder. He realized that by adjusting the time of day he fed his pregnant cows, he could have an effect on the time of day they calved.

Feeding after 5 p.m. resulted in 80 percent of the cows calving during daylight hours. This phenomenon has also been investigated by agricultural researchers in the U.S. One such study at Iowa State University found that when cows were fed early in the day (before noon), only 49.8 percent of them calved during daylight hours, while 85 percent of cows fed late in the day (after 5 p.m.) calved during daylight hours. This feeding method can be implemented without any additional costs and can potentially yield great benefits. The benefits of calving during the day include making it easier for you to check the pregnant animals, increasing the likelihood of identifying cows with calving difficulty and a decreased potential for calf death loss from hypothermia due to calves being born at night when temperatures are generally colder.

Before calving season, monitor the body condition score (BCS) of the cows in your herd. Keeping the majority of the cows in an ideal BCS of 6 will decrease the chance of having calving difficulty. When cows have too much fat cover, some of the fat is laid down in the pelvic canal causing an increased likelihood of calving difficulty. However, when the BCS is inadequate, cows cannot overcome the stresses that the calving season demands. The stresses of calving include the taxing labor process, starting her heavy lactation and the expectation of rebreeding in approximately 90 days. All of these burdens require the cow to be in good flesh going into the calving season. It is always cheaper to build body condition before calving starts than afterwards.

For more information about beef cattle management, contact your county Extension offiice.

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