

Management Tips For The Calving Season



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Calving season brings anticipation to cattlemen. At calving, producers see the result of numerous decisions made over months and even years. However, poor preparation of calving can make it a tortuous time for producers. Problems that can arise due to poor preparation include difficult deliveries, C sections, weak calves, scours, and poor calf crop.

Preparation for successful calving starts long before the first calf is dropped. There are two primary decision making time periods, the long-term breeding and feeding decisions and immediate calving season decisions.

Many producers have begun calving, thus we will focus on the immediate calving season decisions. Many important changes occur in both the pregnant cow and the fetus during the last six to eight weeks of gestation. Two primary changes that occur are production of colostrum and rapid growth of the fetus.

The transfer of nutrients from the cow to calf to spur its rapid growth and the production of high quality colostrums provide the calf with the ability to survive outside the uterus. During this time producers need to recognize the increased need for adequate amounts of energy, protein, vitamin A and phosphorous (along with the other nutrients) that build the calf and the colostrum.

Before entering the calving season, you may want to develop and pre-calving checklist. Items to be considered include: 1) make note of breeding dates, expected calving dates and other records – remember that calves can come a week or more early, especially in heifers; 2) clean, dry pens for calving; 3) have some form of restraint available and ready to use; 4) inventory and re-stock calving supplies – calf puller, OB chain(s) and handles (twines and ropes cannot be sanitized!), OB sleeves and lubricant, non-irritating antiseptic, needles, syringes, ear tags and tagging tools, a frozen supply of good quality colostrum, and esophageal tube feeder.

Cows go through three stages of labor: (1) the preparatory stage, (2) delivery of the calf, and (3) passing of the placenta (afterbirth). The first stage involves the internal preparation for delivery. This stage normally lasts 2 to 3 hours in cows and 4 to 5 hours in heifers, although it can take up to 24 hours and still be considered normal. The first stage of labor concludes with passage of the water bag, an indication the cervix is dilating to some extent.

The second stage of labor is the actual birth of the calf. The cow concentrates now on the in-

tense contractions required to actually deliver her calf. If the delivery proceeds normally, uterine contractions occur more frequently and severely, and the cow will begin to use her abdominal muscles to aid the delivery. The second stage, the passage of the calf through the birth canal, may last from 3 to 6 hours in heifers and from 2 to 4 hours in mature cows. One can anticipate the slowest portions of a normal delivery to be the time when the calf's head must pass through the vestibule and vulva and when the chest passes through the pelvis. This is when many difficulties become apparent.

Dystocia (difficult delivery) will occur in 10 to 50 percent of heifers and 3 to 5 percent of mature cows. The single largest factor contributing to dystocia is the birth weight of the calf. Premature assistance can be detrimental because the cow may not be fully dilated. Waiting too long may excessively tire both the heifer/cow and the calf. When in doubt call your herd veterinarian for assistance.

During the third stage of labor, the placenta is generally passed within 1/2 hour to 8 hours after the birth of the calf. Any membranes not expelled after 24 hours are usually considered retained. It is no longer generally accepted that the membranes must be manually removed – “clean the cow.”

It is best to simply leave the cow and newborn calf alone following delivery. Human presence may interfere with the mothering instincts of the cow. Unless necessary, freezing or muddy conditions for example, the cow and calf should not be moved from the birth place because the cow may not willingly leave. Calves will attempt to stand within minutes, but the more difficult the delivery the longer it takes the calf. Nervous cows may make it difficult at first for the calf to find the teat, but generally speaking, the mothering instinct and the calf's persistence result in successful nursing.

Calves need to drink a significant amount of colostrum within the first 1/2 to 2 hours of life to get off to a good start. A prolonged delivery will increase the time needed to stand and nurse, and reduce profit in two ways – increased calving death loss and decreased rate of gain of the calf. A good management practice is to see that the calf has at least 5 percent of its birth weight in good quality colostrum within two hours of birth and an additional 5 percent within 18 to 20 hours.

Calving is a critical time – the culmination of numerous decisions. Producers should begin planning as soon as possible – it is much cheaper and easier than treating problems. Happy calving! Δ

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