



Livestock Production

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Healthy Calf Important To Beef Producers' Profit

The birth of a live, healthy calf is most important source of profit in beef production. If a producer does not have a healthy calf from every cow, the economic loss is significant. Not only does the producer lack a calf for a replacement animal or for market, but he or she also has lost the cost of the labor and feed required to maintain the cow.

In some situations, there is also the risk of losing the cow due to delivery complications. Given the marginal profitability of the cattle industry this type of loss can be devastating.

To set the stage for production of a live, healthy calf from each cow and heifer, the producer must think ahead before breeding. Ideally, the bull should have passed a breeding soundness exam to increase the probability that he can successfully inseminate the cows. The cows should be maintained nutritionally to have a body condition score of at least 5 on a scale of 1 to 9.

Vaccinations should be current, with some vaccinations, such as for vibriosis, received just before breeding. Some vaccinations may be given to cattle about midway through gestation, such as for leptospirosis to protect from abortions and for the clostridial diseases to increase maternal immunity that will be passed to the calf in the colostrum.

Records should be maintained on every cow. The records should note when the cows were observed in standing heat and exposed to the bull or artificially inseminated in order to calculate protected calving dates. The cows should be checked after breeding season to determine if they are pregnant. Cows that are not going to produce a calf will be a source of economic loss and should be culled.

Before the start of calving season, the herdsman should have assembled a "calving kit." This kit should contain plastic obstetrical (OB) sleeves for protection of the person and the cow, water bucket, soap, OB lubricant, chains with handles or nylon straps, and iodine. The chains are easier to keep clean than nylon straps.

It is extremely important to use a generous amount of lubricant when assisting with a delivery. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for the calf to be delivered with minimal stress on both the cow and calf.

Producers should understand the calving process and be able to determine when the cow and calf need assistance. Some indications of the impending birth process are an increase in the cow's mammary development, which may be accompanied by an increasing tightness in the udder, and "dropping of the pin bones," which refers to a relaxation of the sacrosciatic ligaments.

Cows getting ready to calve may show a reluctance to eat, signs of abdominal discomfort, a vaginal discharge, or a tendency to stay isolated from the rest of the herd.

The actual calving process can be divided into three stages.

- Stage 1**—the preparatory stage, can be characterized as the beginning of uterine contractions.
- Stage 2**—of labor is characterized by the full dilation of the cervix, appearance of the second water sac, and visibility of the calf's feet and/or nose within the water sac.
- Stage 3**—begins after the delivery of the calf and involves the expulsion of the fetal membranes or "cleaning" of the cow.

If the cow has a problem at any time that is beyond the producer's ability to handle, he or she should not hesitate to get help from someone with more experience or a veterinarian.