

Tips For A Successful Calving Season

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As most producers are aware, calving season is a busy time of year for most producers. It is important to plan the calving season from the start of the breeding season to make it as stress free as possible. There are many things producers can do to reduce stress and problems associated with the calving season, but the best producers remain ready for problems to protect the investment in the calf crop. Below are a few tips for making your calving season as stress free and successful as possible.

- Prepare and carry with you a calving kit. There are some problems that producers themselves can take care of if properly prepared. Keep in mind however, that there are limitations that producers must realize that will indicate a need for professional help. Your calving kit should include several items including, lubricant, palpation sleeves, colostrum supplement, towels, esophageal feeder, calving chains, bucket, water, flashlight, rope halter, catch rope, the phone number of at least two veterinarians, and possibly a heat source. A calf jack is not included in a producer kit as this usually indicates a problem that requires professional help. The uses of each of these will be discussed in the additional tips below.
- Having a very defined breeding season regardless of when it occurs, allows a great advantage at calving time in that it will define the beginning and end of the calving season. From a health, production, and management point of view, the shorter the period (60 to 90 days) the better. In addition, noting breeding dates on the animals possible to collect these dates on will shorten the hours spent during the calving season. If information is known about the sire in regards to birth weight indicators, then many potential problems can be closely observed and mishaps avoided. These factors, along with regular checks, will allow a producer to avoid many calving season mishaps. The extra effort and expense to save one calf is well worth the cost when the value of that weaned feeder calf is approaching \$725.00.
- Know what is normal. Producers should familiarize themselves with the normal calving process and the visual signs associated with each. The first stage of birth would be the presentation of the water bag and the breaking of the bag. This would indicate the start of the birth process and the fluid released is to lubricate the birth canal. This phase will normally take somewhere between two and six

hours depending on the age of the cow. Heifers usually take longer than older cows. The second phase is the presentation of the calf. Normal presentation usually begins with the appearance of two feet and a nose. The soles of the hoof should be pointed

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downward in a normal presentation. Hooves with the soles pointed upward usually indicates a breech, or backwards presentation which would indicate a more difficult birth. The presentation of the head and front quarters is followed closely by the rear quarters. This stage will take anywhere from a few minutes to almost an hour depending on the status of the cow and calf weight. Usually, heifers will take longer than mature cows. Heavier birth weights can result in longer times for birth to occur. The third and last stage of the birth process is the elimination of the afterbirth. This stage can take up to 8 hours, but after that time, producers should seek assistance for those animals that have retained afterbirth. Under no circumstances should the afterbirth be removed by pulling on the portion outside the animal. Removing afterbirth is job for a professional. Producers that are comfortable and knowledgeable about the normal birth process should be prepared to assist the animal or call for assistance from a professional. Remember that if you are clean and careful, it is impossible to assist too early, but always cleanly and carefully.

- When it is determined that assistance is needed, there are a few practices that are important. First of all, prepare lubricant for lubricating the birth canal. This can be done by using a commercially available lubricant, or by preparing a mixture of Metamucil for those who are budget minded.. Lubricant is one item that can be used without fear of using too much, so apply liberally to all surfaces of the calf and inside of the birth canal. Be sure to clean the outside of the cow as thoroughly as possible, removing all foreign matter that might carry bacteria resulting in infection of the uterus. Use a mild disinfectant such as Betadine or Nolvasan in the wash solution to further lessen the incidence of infection. Be sure to apply the calving chains to the legs with the first loop placed above the pastern joint and a half hitch placed between the hoof and pastern joint. This placement of chains on both legs will lessen the chance of injury to the leg structure during the pulling process. Be sure to pull first one leg and then the other to walk the front quarters of the calf through the birth canal. Be sure to check your progress often and re-apply lubricant each time. When the center of the calf's belly crosses the anterior or front edge of the pelvis, the umbilical cord will likely be ruptured or broken, destroying the calf's ability to receive oxygen transfer from the placenta. This is critical in the case of the breech birth when the calf's head is still inside the birth canal as fluid will be drawn into the lungs as the calf attempts to breathe. This is the time when time is critical and the calf must be delivered as quickly as possible to achieve a successful birth. Producers should understand their limitations in assisting in the delivery and not attempt assistance when unsure. A professional cannot correct mistakes made before they begin their assistance.
- Make sure that the calf nurses soon after birth. The ingestion of colostrum within the first 12 hours is essential in establishing passive immunity in the calf. In fact, it is often essential to the calf's survival, in that the ability of the young animal to respond to disease and bacteria challenges often are dependent on immunity received from the colostrum. It is a good idea to collect colostrum from a nearby dairy, preferably from the older cows, and freeze for later use. When thawing frozen colostrum, thaw by immersing the container in warm water. Never thaw by placing on direct heat or microwaving the colostrum. Another option is a commercially available colostrum substitute. It is imperative that the animal receive the colostrum whether by nursing, bottle, or esophageal feeder. Remember to discard any unused colostrum after it has been stored for a year.
- After the calf is warm and properly protected by passive immunity, it is time to make sure that the calf is warm and dry. It is much better if the cow attends to this as it allows a bond to develop between the cow and calf. If the calf is weak, it is a good idea to dry

the calf and provide some warmth. Usually, a vigorous calf will need no assistance if the cow cleans the calf and it nurses quickly.

- Keep a watchful eye on the calf crop throughout the development up to weaning. Producers should be aware of the potential for scours to rob calves of valuable pounds during the growth period up to weaning. Scours can cause serious problems including weak and dead calves and cause serious financial losses. Scours are easily treated when detected early in the progress of the disease. Talk to your local veterinarian for treatment options, but remember that scours cause dehydration. Dehydration is the major cause of financial loss and dehydration treatment should always be your first line of defense for calf scours.

Remember, that you can plan for a successful calving season starting with the breeding season and be prepared for emergencies when they occur. Talk to your veterinarian and Extension agent to prepare for your next calving season.