COW/CALF MANAGEMENT

Managing your Calving Season

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The impending calving season is approaching for many cattle producers in the upper mid-west. With calving comes the anticipation of calves, which have resulted from many management decisions prior to calving. Choices such as, the breed and genetic potential of the bull that was purchased during the last breeding season, the AI sire selections, or even heifers that were raised or purchased will reveal their worth to each individual producer. Yes, calving is the most exciting, most exhilarating, most rewarding, yet most nerve-racking, most tiring, and, at times, most frustrating period of the production cycle of a cow.

The financial base of a beef operation is the sale of cattle. Therefore, it behooves us to ensure that we have the greatest number of cattle available for sale on an annual basis. Yet, the most common reason for calf losses in the beef cattle industry is still calving difficulty. All of the decisions that were made up until calving could be fruitless if adequate preparation has not been made prior to the calving season. Without adequate planning, producers will note an increase in C-sections and births that require assistance. In addition, the percentage of calves that are weak or have scour will increase and the overall calving percentage will be poorer.

Starting to prepare a few months in advance (while you still have time!) will save calves and will reduce the incidence of disease. Making a checklist, which includes the following will make your calving season more rewarding:

- Remind yourself of when your breeding season started and check expected calving dates (remember that some calves will arrive up to ten days early!)
- Prepare pens or pasture for calving, ensuring that they are clean with adequate water, feed, and bedding available
- Ensure that your restraint system (chute or calving pen) is working
- Clean and restock your calving supplies
  - Calf puller in good working order and clean
  - Chains and handles should be sanitized (don’t use rope or baling twine – they are tough to keep clean)
  - Sleeves and lubricant
  - Tattooing equipment, ear tags, and tag applicator
  - Adequate needles and syringes
  - Calving medications prescribed by your veterinarian
  - A supply of good quality colostrum
  - An esophageal tube feeder
- The emergency phone number of your veterinarian
Understanding the process of calving is critical before you are able to determine whether a heifer or cow requires assistance. Although there are differences among individual females in the way that they act prior to calving and the length of labor, there are a few signs that are obvious. About two to six weeks before calving the vulva will appear swollen, the udder will increase in size, and the area between the tailhead and pin bones will sink or “relax”.

The process of parturition or “calving” is a complex process. Many mechanisms affect this process, but none completely control it. Predicting the time of calving would be of value under certain conditions, but it is difficult to predict time precisely on the basis of clinical signs. Normal calving is a continuous process, but is often divided into three stages for the purposes of description: 1) during Stage 1 females usually will seek an isolated place and vaginal discharges increase, plus they will show signs of uneasiness and pain; 2) Stage 2 begins when the cervix is fully dilated and the second water sac begins to show, plus fetal parts enter the birth canal further stimulating stronger uterine contractions, whereas delivery defines the end of this stage; and 3) Stage 3 is completed when the placenta or fetal membrane is usually expelled within 8-12 hours after delivery of the calf.

The primary goal of producers is to ensure that calving is proceeding normally. If cows are not progressing normally then a series of questions need to be asked:

- Do I intervene and assist the cow?
- Can the calf be delivered by pulling?
- Do I call my veterinarian or someone else with more expertise than I have?

The last question is the most critical, yet the least frequently used and generally is used more as a last resort rather than a solution. Keep in mind that if you see something new that you have not experienced before that a live calf and healthy cow are your first priority. Feel free to call us if you need more information that will help you achieve a successful calving season. Good luck!