

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Managing Calving Difficulty

For spring-calving herds, calving season is fast approaching. While calving season provides many rewarding experiences, when a high percentage of the deliveries are difficult, calving season can be severely challenging and stressful. Being prepared to manage difficult calving situations can lessen the impact of difficult births on the cow, the calf and the producer.

Prior to the expected date for the first calf to be born, gather the equipment you will need, including: a clean bucket, a source for clean water, soap (for cleaning the cow), disinfectant, lubricant, towels, obstetrical (OB) chains and handles and plastic sleeves. You will want to identify a clean, well-lit area that is protected from cold or wet weather where the heifer or cow can be restrained with a head catch or halter.

Because difficult births can be caused by many different factors, it is not possible to own cows and completely avoid calving problems. I would consider a herd with greater than 15% of heifers or 5% of cows needing assistance as being excessive. Calving problems are a bigger concern for heifers than for cows, simply because heifers have not reached their full skeletal size and don't have the experience of previous calvings. Heavy birth weights are primarily influenced by the genetic contributions for calf size from both the bull and cow.

About 5% of calves are in abnormal positions at birth, such as forelegs

or head turned back, breech or backwards. In many situations, an abnormally positioned calf will require the assistance of a veterinarian or an experienced herdsman to position the calf correctly prior to delivery. If calf position cannot be corrected, the veterinarian may have to perform a C-section. Recognizing normal calving is an important

skill to properly manage calving difficulty. A common mistake is pulling a calf before the calf and birth canal are ready.

It is not necessary, and often not appropriate, to pull the calf as soon as feet appear. When the feet first appear, the cervix may not be fully dilated and the rest of the birth canal has not had a chance to fully relax. Excessive pulling at this point, especially with a large calf, may cause tears of the birth canal.

Because the length of labor can vary, I usually recommend producers restrain and check a heifer or cow if no progress is seen in a 30-minute time span once the feet or water bag

are visible. If, after examination, no problem can be identified, then the calving process should be allowed to continue unassisted for another 30 minutes. While perfect cleanliness cannot be expected, it is very important to keep your arms and equipment as clean as possible.

In order to make the best decisions during calving season, it is important to have a good facility to assist with calving difficulty. Learning what normal delivery can look like among different heifers and cows helps you avoid causing problems by intervening too early.

Becoming comfortable examining the cow at calving helps you determine if the calf is in the proper position and able to pass through the birth canal without expert assistance. And, working closely with your veterinarian so that you can receive advice and assistance when needed is important to provide the best care for your herd. **AJ**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.

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