

Preparing the Cow for Calving

by Heather Smith Thomas

Are you ready for the 1991 calving season? If so, you actually began preparing last year. The first step is to make sure your cows were on an adequate level of nutrition to breed back on schedule after their last calf.

Once the cow is pregnant, feed levels for maintaining body condition will be sufficient to provide for the needs of the growing fetus. The fetus doesn't need much extra from the mother until the last three months of gestation. This is when it's growing the fastest.

During those last months make sure the cow is receiving adequate protein and vitamin A to meet that need.

Lactation is more stressful to cows than pregnancy. It requires a higher level of feed — both quantity and quality. The cow's need for protein, vitamin

A, calcium and total calories is highest when she is producing milk. If she isn't getting enough nutrients to meet the needs of milk production, she may not cycle soon enough to breed back on time.

A fall-calving cow on green pasture will not be short of protein or vitamin A, since these are well supplied by green forage. Since most cows store vitamin A in their liver, a winter calving cow (December, January or February) will probably have adequate vitamin A for the growing fetus. Exceptions would be cows on dry

pastures in late summer and fall. If winter calving cows haven't been on green feed since mid-summer, they may need supplemental vitamin A during the last part of gestation, as well.

Cows calving in March, April and May will definitely need a source of vitamin A if they have been fed grass hay all winter. Vitamin A can be provided in feed supplements, by injection, or by feeding good quality alfalfa hay.

Protein levels should also be checked for cows calving in winter or spring. Some types of pasture grasses dry up and lose most of their protein and feed value after freezing. Cows wintering on dryland grasses may not need supplement, but cows wintering on bottomlands where irrigated grasses dry up and lose food value may become short on protein.

Know your feeds and forages. When there is no more green feed available, provide additional protein and nutrients by feeding alfalfa hay or protein blocks.

For any special vitamin or mineral needs, check with your veterinarian. Some soils are deficient in iodine, selenium, copper or other important trace minerals. Mineral supplements are a must in some regions, especially during the last months of gestation.

Cold weather is a factor that must be taken into consideration when feeding pregnant cows. When temperatures drop, a cow needs a lot more roughage in her diet to maintain body heat. The digestion and breakdown of roughage in the ruminant's fore stomachs produce a lot of heat calories. A diet of straight alfalfa hay is not ideal for cows in cold weather. Cows can produce more heat from digestion and breakdown of cellulose (the fibrous part of roughage) than from protein.

If you feed extra roughage during cold weather, add more grass hay or straw to their diet. Cows will eat as much of the extra roughage as necessary to keep themselves warm. They will stay full and comfortable and won't lose weight during a cold spell.

You don't want the pregnant cow to lose weight before she calves; it's too hard to put it back on afterward when she's lactating and she may not breed back on time.

Heifers have special needs. The coming two-year-old is still growing. She has a tough job if she is growing, producing a calf, nursing it, shedding her baby teeth (making it harder to eat feed) and trying to breed back again.

This age group needs special care and pampering; they shouldn't have to compete with older cows for feed. If you are feeding hay or supplements, separate the young cows from the herd to make sure they get their share of feed.

If a young cow isn't carrying enough flesh when she calves, or loses a lot of weight after she starts milking, she'll have a hard time breeding back again. Give heifers a break by keeping them in good body condition at the end of their gestation period.

Don't make the mistake, however, of feeding too much protein. Some producers have discovered, to their dismay, that too much protein for first-calvers results in exceptionally fast growth of the fetus during the last part of gestation. The result is big, difficult-to-deliver calves. The best management tip is to feed a well balanced diet in adequate amount.

Exercise is important for cows. Cows and heifers kept in large pastures have better muscle tone and easier calving than those kept in small pens. You want your cows in good flesh, but not fat and flabby. If you use calving barns during cold weather, or for closer observation, make sure cows get adequate exercise before confining them.

Every cow in our herd has to be gentle enough to be worked around the pens and barns by people on foot. Some of our heifers are flighty at first — they grow up in the



mountains and only see people on horseback — but they gentle down fast after we put them into the maternity ward with twice-a-day feedings. It also helps to walk through the cow herd several times a day.

Since we calve during cold weather, we check cows every two hours at night (or more often during sub-zero weather). The cows and heifers soon learn that a human ambling around with a flashlight is nothing to worry about. Having gentle cows makes calving time a lot easier.

We use an old, experienced cow to lead a first-time heifer into the barn. We also have at least one practice “fire drill” ahead of time to acquaint the heifers with our pens, gates and alleys.



Cows are quite trainable if you use patience, common sense and give them a chance to figure out what they are supposed to do. On our place, the really wild ones (the cows that run over the top of you instead of going into the pen) get sold.

If cows are confined at calving time, make sure they have clean, dry bedding. Out in the pasture a cow can usually find a clean, dry spot when the weather isn't too wet and sloppy. A dirty bedding area creates problems with dirty teats, mastitis and newborn calf sickness.

Dry bedding also prevents frozen teats during severe cold weather. If teat ends freeze and seal over, there will be scabs or thickening and the calf won't be able to nurse.

What works well for one producer may not work for another. Each operation is different. You must perfect your own management techniques to best utilize the feed sources at hand and develop a herd of cattle that will be efficient for your operation — cows that can go through pregnancy and lactation and breed back; cows that produce calves year after year with just a little good care and management.

A little calving time preparation can help pay off with a good crop of healthy calves.

