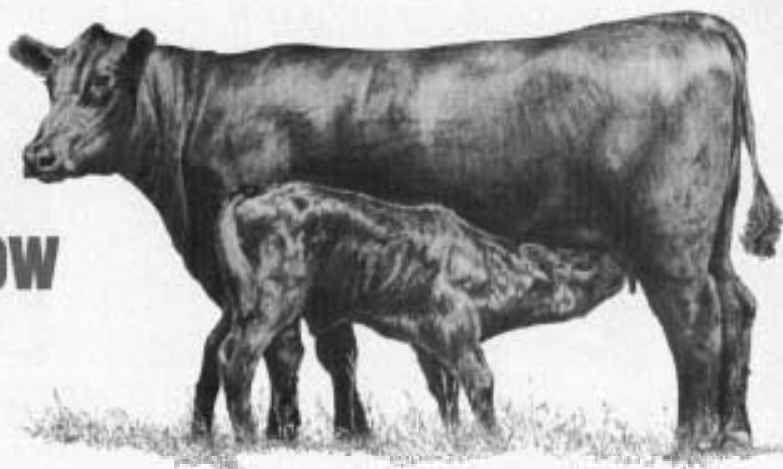


Preparing the Cow for Calving



Are you ready for the 1994 calving season? If so, you actually began preparing last year. The first step was 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 are sufficient to provide for the needs of the growing fetus. The fetus doesn't need much extra from its 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.

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, 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 during the last part of gestation. Vitamin A can be provided in feed supplements, by feeding good quality alfalfa hay, or by injection.

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 four 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 a 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 heifer 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) 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 young cows from the herd to make sure they get their share.

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.

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 wet bedding area creates problems such as dirty teats, mastitis and newborn sickness. Dry bedding also prevents frozen udders during severe cold weather. If the teat ends freeze and seal over, scabs and thickening prevents the calf from nursing.

What works well for one producer may not work for another. Every 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 care and management.

A little calving time preparation pays off with a good crop of healthy calves.

—Heather Smith Thomas

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