

Do you anticipate the beginning of calving season with eagerness or dread? It's probably safe to say most cow-calf producers are eager. Calving time represents a period of renewal — a significant step toward the realization of a producer's goals. The problem for some producers is they really aren't ready.

Calving season is fraught with challenges. The readiness with which producers respond is what separates good managers from poor ones. Generally the difference between the two is a matter of attitude and preparation. Savvy managers realize that none of the troubles that accompany calving season will change the course of world events. They do their best and move forward. They also realize, however, that challenges can be managed better with some advanced planning.

Dale Zobell, Utah State University Extension specialist, says producers usually face fewer surprises when they first plan for a successful calving season.

"We prepare for it with bull selection, heifer management and the health and nutritional management of the cow herd," says Zobell. "We gear up by organizing the facilities where we are going to calve. We get ready for it by assembling the necessary equipment and materials to assist with calving, and to care for newborn calves. We aspire for it by scheduling adequate manpower."

Unfortunately, too many producers fail to prepare, organize, assemble or schedule. When calving season begins, they are not armed and ready. Just ask retired veterinarian and active Hereford seedstock breeder Alanson (Lance) Jones, Broken Bow, Neb. During 32 years of veterinary practice, Jones responded to countless calls to aid producers facing calving season challenges.

"I can remember plenty of calls to help ranchers that weren't ready. Often, they had no catch-pen, no chute and just no way to confine a cow experiencing calving difficulty," recalls Jones.

"One time a rancher had run a cow into an old barn. It was the middle of the night, and this black cow was in a big barn with no stalls or partitions of any kind — and no lights. I had to go in there by myself, get a rope on the cow, snub her to a support post and hope she didn't pull the barn down on top of us while I tried to deliver her calf," he says with a grin. "If a person is going to be in the cow business, they really should think about how they can make calving easier for the cows and newborn calves, as well as for themselves and anybody they ask to help."

Nutrition is important

Jones says preparation for calving involves more than suitable facilities and having basic equipment and supplies on hand. And it should start long before the first calf hits the ground.



PHOTO BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON

Are You Armed and Ready for Calving Season?

by Troy Smith

"As far as I'm concerned, it starts with cow herd nutrition, including a good mineral program. Producers can talk to nutritionists about mineral programs suited to their local areas," Jones says.

"Having your cows in good shape, nutritionally, is hard on your veterinarian's practice," he admits. "The cows will have fewer health problems and less trouble during calving. They're better able to handle the stress of calving. They clean (expel the placenta) afterward, and get ready to rebreed sooner. Good nutrition enhances the cow's immunity to disease and she passes that on to the calf through antibodies in the colostrum."

Many nutritionists recommend putting cows on an increased plane of nutrition during the 60 days prior to calving. Providing them with 2 lb. of crude protein per day and enough energy to have them gaining weight will enhance the unborn calf's growth and immune function, as well as the cow's future reproductive performance.

When calving in cold weather, Jones recommends cows be in body condition score (BCS) 5 or

better. Cows in BCS 4 may get by alright if calving takes place during moderate weather. He warns against letting cows get too thin, though, as they are less likely to produce high-quality colostrum. They may not breed back as readily, which could lengthen next year's calving season. And their calves are less likely to perform well.

"Health considerations include treating cows for lice — in the fall, for spring calving cows, so they're clean well ahead of calving season and lice aren't spread to the calves," Jones says. "And scour-prevention vaccinations work well when administered correctly. First-calf heifers should be vaccinated twice. Vaccinate them six weeks prior to calving and do it again two weeks ahead of calving season. As cows, they should get an annual booster shot two weeks before they're due to calve."

Calving location

Jones also advises producers to consider the location of their calving grounds. Is the area reasonably clean and well drained? Avoid calving on winter-feeding grounds where a buildup of manure increases calf exposure



Alanson (Lance) Jones, DVM, Broken Bow, Neb., is a veteran of many calving seasons, having practiced veterinary medicine for 32 years. He's also been personally involved in the cattle business for more than 50 years. Though retired from practice now, he still heads Jones Herefords — a registered seedstock operation.

to viral and bacterial infections. Similarly, using the same calving area, year after year, often promotes calf scour problems.

Is there adequate protection from weather? Cold-weather calving generally requires windbreaks or sheds. If a cow has difficulty and needs assistance, can she be easily moved to a barn? Common sense suggests facilities be cleaned and repaired before they are needed. Fences and

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gates should be fixed so they aren't a hindrance later. If portable panels are to be used, put them where they are needed before they freeze down in the winter. If the barn has lights, make sure they work. And it wouldn't hurt to oil the headgate.

Calf-pulling tools

Every producer hopes they won't be needed, but it is wise to locate the calf puller and OB chains or straps. If they are needed, it's best to have a good supply of gloves or sleeves, and plenty of OB lubricant.

"A lot of producers know how to handle cases of dystocia (calving difficulty) and seldom need a veterinarian. Others call for help at the first sign of trouble," says Jones. "I think it's important for every producer to understand the three stages of parturition, know what they can do themselves and realize when they need help. Of course, that's different for everybody."

Jones says a cow in the first stage of parturition (birth) typically appears restless, often lying down and getting up repeatedly. She may hold her tail in an elevated position and the water bag may appear, protrude from the cow's vulva and even break. This stage may last from two to six hours, but it's still early in the process.

"During the second stage, which may last three to four hours, the cow lays down and strains like she's actually in labor. You might see the calf's feet sticking out and be able to tell if the calf

is presented correctly," explains Jones.

"In the third stage, the cow is pushing out the calf. If she hasn't delivered in four hours, you'd better be checking for a malpresentation — a backward or upside-down calf, or one with its head back. If the calf is coming wrong, you need to know what you're doing to make it right, or call for help," he adds.

"I always caution people against getting in too much of a hurry to pull a calf. Extraction before the cow is fully dilated can cause lacerations to her cervix or uterus. You can really tear one up inside, especially when using a calf puller."

A cow that experiences a long period of labor may be reluctant to get up after her calf is born. Jones recommends urging her to her feet. Lying prone for too long may increase the chances of uterine prolapse. Occasionally, a temporary paralysis will afflict cows following long, difficult labor. In these cases, Jones recommends getting the cow onto her sternum (on her chest) and pulling her hind legs out behind her. This will help the uterus return to a favorable position and lessen chances of prolapse.

According to Jones, one of the most important things for producers to have available during calving season is a spray bottle of gentle iodine solution. In his opinion, using iodine to treat the navels of newborn calves against infection should be a standard practice.

The importance of colostrum

The sooner a newborn calf gets up and nurses, the more readily colostrum antibodies are absorbed. If a calf has not nursed within two hours after birth, producers should take action to help the calf nurse. If that doesn't work, the cow can be milked and the colostrum hand-fed to the calf. When that isn't practical, milk from another cow will do. Or, frozen colostrum secured ahead of time can be thawed, warmed and fed to the calf.

"A lot of people thaw frozen colostrum in a microwave oven. But don't get carried away and cook it," warns Jones. "Too much heat destroys the antibodies."

There are powdered commercial colostrum-substitute products available as well. They aren't as good as momma's milk, but better than nothing.

"Once a calf is up and going, producers should get a new cow-calf pair out of a heavily used calving area and into a clean environment as soon as possible," Jones says. "The sooner the better."

Sometimes, even the best manager's calves develop scours. It can happen fast, within 48 hours. If it does, Jones says fluid therapy is essential to fight dehydration. It's a good idea to have one of the several commercial electrolyte products on hand. If scouring calves are detected and treated early, electrolyte solution administered orally (with an esophageal tube) may be sufficient. However, Jones says intravenous solution often is the best resource.

Other tools

Producers might want to think about having some other equipment ready before calving starts in earnest. If a new calf has to be brought from the pasture to the barn, along with its mother, that homemade "calf sled" that can be pulled behind a saddle horse or four-wheeler should be kept handy. Alternatives include commercially manufactured "carriers" that can be mounted on a four-wheeler or a pickup bumper.

If you don't like to bring chilled newborns into the house to be warmed beside the kitchen stove, consider building or buying a calf "warming box." Heat lamps can be useful too.

The precalving checklist might also include a new record book, ear tags and scale. Find the tattoo equipment and ink if they're part of your identification program. A good flashlight or spotlight, with new batteries, is helpful during night checks.

Keep your veterinarian's telephone number in the pickup, taped to the refrigerator door or programmed into your cell phone. You might have to call him out to the place or take a critter to the clinic. By the way, have you checked the air pressure in those stock trailer tires lately? **HW**