

Managing dystocia in beef COWS

Nothing is more disheartening as losing a newborn calf. Sometimes it's just bad luck, and sometimes you can intervene and save a calf.

Spring calving has now begun, and the information below provides a timely reminder on the stages of calving and some management tactics that you can undertake to improve calf survival.

The calving process is divided into three distinct stages, although these stages may overlap, and uncomplicated calving will be observed as a continuous process. During stage one a cow will be restless, often walking the paddock and possibly taking interest in other calves in the paddock. Stage two starts with the rupture of the bag of embryonic fluid surrounding the calf, followed by strong uterine contractions to expel the calf. Once the bubble of embryonic fluid (or calving bag) has appeared you should be able to leave the cow undisturbed for about an hour, by which time you should be able to see two feet appear and it could be another hour but often less for a mature cow until the calf is born and safely on the ground. Stage three of calving follows delivery of the calf and uterine contractions continue to help expel the placenta and membranes generally within six to 24 hours after calving. As a rule, cows need to be examined if a calf has not been delivered within four hours of her showing initial signs of calving such as restlessness, contractions or breaking of the bag surrounding the calf.

In most cases, observation twice daily will identify most calving problems; however, if you notice something happening or something unusual, it pays to recheck the cow in an hour or so to check on her progress. During this time, the cow should have progressed to the next stage of calving.

The things to watch out for are:

- excessive restlessness in the cow and it not settling to calve
- a cow's failure to progress to the next stage of calving for a considerable time (one hour)
- the appearance of only one foot, or if one foot is considerably further out than the other
- a breached birth – if the points of the toes are pointing downwards then this is indicative of a breached birth is and intervention is most likely required (the toes pointing upwards is the normal front feet presentation)
- lack of a visible calf (i.e. Despite the cow making considerable effort no calf is visible).

Once you have made the decision to intervene it's important to prepare what you need. Some useful items include calving chains or soft ropes, a calf puller jack or rope and pulley, obstetrics lube and a bucket of warm water. Once you have the equipment ready quietly move the cow to the yards and into the cattle crush. Keep your mobile phone handy so you can phone your local Veterinarian if the calving problem is more complex than you envisaged.

Wash your hands and arms and apply the obstetrics lube and investigate the position of the two front legs. Often one leg will be further forward than the other so apply gentle pressure to even the two legs up. Before you progress any further ensure the head is following with the calf's nose positioned between the front knees, if the head is not in position locate the head and move into position before applying any pressure. If one of the front legs is not present, locate the missing leg, grasp the foot in your palm, contract the leg and move outwards in a circular motion. Lift the leg upwards and outwards until the hoof moves through the pelvis, then extend the leg into position alongside the other front leg.

Once the front legs and calf's head is in position, attach the calving chains or soft rope to the calf's front legs above the ankles and form a double loop to spread the pressure on the calf's legs.

Using firm pressure on alternate legs in a slightly downward motion, allow the cow to rest every couple of minutes and check that the head is still following in the correct position. Once the head has appeared, clear the nostrils and mouth of the calf to prevent anything being sucked into the lungs when the calf takes its first breath. Continuing with a downward pressure, the calf should continue until the shoulders emerge, once again give the cow a rest and clear the airway again as often a quantity of slimy material will be expelled from the calf's mouth when in this position.

From here the cow will often push the calf out herself or it may need firm pressure to free the hips and expel the rest of the calf. If possible, gently lower the calf to the ground. Take the calf to the head of the mother to start the bonding process, check and clear the airway again, then step back to allow the bonding to continue.

If it is a small calf, it's worthwhile checking for twins. Once the cow is showing considerable interest in the calf she can be released from the crush and left undisturbed to tend to her newborn calf.

For a calf presenting in the breach or backwards position a similar technique is used. However, raising the calf's legs upwards when applying pressure, allows you to feel the calf's hocks to confirm if it is in a breached position. Ensure the tail is not twisted out of position and reposition if needed. Apply the calving chains or soft ropes as described previously and firm upwards pressure should bring the calf into position and the hocks exposed. Often this is when the calf's hips are coming through the pelvis and the shape of the calf makes this difficult. Once past this point, continue the pressure to pull the calf completely out as the umbilical cord has been compressed or broken by this stage and it will trigger a breathing response from the calf that will suck the embryonic fluid into the lungs. Once the calf is born, quickly clear the nostrils and mouth and if necessary, suspend the calf by the ropes on the back legs, up on the fence rail to allow any fluid to drain from the calf's mouth and throat. If you can do this near the cow's head, it helps with the initial bonding process. Lower the calf to the ground and continue to monitor and clear the nose and mouth, if necessary, tickle the nostril with a piece of straw to encourage a response or sneeze from the calf which helps to clear the airway. Move the cow and calf to a dry sheltered place in the yard with minimum distractions to allow cow and calf to bond.

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