COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter
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Look Back at the Calving Season and Start to Make Improvements Now

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

Only 1 to 2 months ago the spring calving cows were calving, the temperature was cold and the calving pastures were muddy. Experience would say that you do not want to ask cow calf operators how "calving" is then, because the response would be less than objective, reflecting bone-chilling cold and not enough sleep. However if you wait too long, perhaps until this fall, time will have mellowed most of the events and one soon has difficulty matching a calving season with particular problems. Now is perhaps the best time to make a few notes on what to change for next year.

The first step is to list the dead calves. Hopefully, your cattle are in a record system that will provide that information. If not, grab a piece of paper and pencil and list the calves. Your calving notebook should have the dead calves checked off and a brief notation on what happened to each. Until all the calves are listed, the shock of lost opportunities has not had its full impact.

Can you identify a pattern of problems?

Was most of the death loss right at delivery and involved two-year old heifers? This could indicate that sire selection needs to be done more carefully, with attention being paid to low birth weight EPD sires for heifers. Perhaps the heifers were underdeveloped. This could contribute to more calving difficulty than necessary. Do you provide assistance to heifers after they have been in stage II of labor for one hour? Longer deliveries result in stress on both calf and cow.

Was the death loss more prevalent after the calves had reached 10 days to 2 weeks of age? This of course often means that calf diarrhea (or scours) is a major concern. Calf scours will be more likely to occur to calves from first calf heifers. Calves that receive inadequate amounts of colostrum within the first 6 hours of life are 5 to 6 times more likely to die from calf scours.

Calves that are born to thin heifers are weakened at birth and receive less colostrum which compounds their likelihood of scours. Often, these same calves were born via a difficult delivery and adds to the chances of getting sick and dying. All of this means that we need to reassess the bred heifer growing program to assure that the heifers were in a body condition score of 6 (moderate flesh) at calving time.

Do you use the same trap or pasture each year for calving? There may be a buildup of bacteria or viruses that contribute to calf diarrhea in that pasture. This particular calving pasture may need a rest for the upcoming calving season. Plus it is always a good idea to get new calves and their mothers out of the calving pasture as soon as they can be moved comfortably to a new pasture to get them away from other potential calf scour organisms.

Pre-calving scours vaccines (to the cows) may be recommended by your veterinarian for next winter and spring. This should be considered an important short-term plan to reduce the incidence of calf diarrhea. The above suggestions are more long-term solutions to the problem.

Find Bad Udders Now

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

One criteria that should be examined to cull cows is udder quality. Bad udders should be culled. Spring calving cows are in the peak of lactation. This is an excellent time to note in the cow record book any cow that has an unsound udder. Cows that have obviously poor udders could be marked for the cull list and removed from the herd next fall when the calves are weaned. Beef cattle producers are not as likely to think about udder health and shape as are dairy producers, but this attribute affects cow productivity and should be considered. OSU studied the effect that bad udders had on cow productivity. They found that cows with one or two dry quarters had calves with severely reduced weaning weights (50 - 60 pounds) compared to cows with no dry quarters. Plus, cows with bad udders tend to pass that trait along to daughters that may be kept as replacement heifers. Udder conformation and soundness is moderately heritable.

Two key types of "bad" udders to cull include: the large funnel-shaped teats and weak udder suspension. The large funnel-shaped teats may be indicative of a previous case of mastitis and cause the quarter to be incapable of producing milk. In addition, large teats may be difficult for the newborn calf to get it's mouth around and receive nourishment and colostrum very early in life. As some cows age, the ligament that separates the two sides of the udder becomes weakened and allows the entire udder to hang very near to the ground. Again it becomes difficult for the newborn calf to find a teat when the udder hangs too close to the ground. Select against these faults and over time your cow herd will improve its udder health.

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