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New Year’s Resolution: Plan for a Successful Calving Season

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With the New Year comes a new calf crop for many Mississippi cow-calf producers. Calving season is getting started in many cattle herds around the state and can be a very intense time for producers. Here are a few simple management techniques that will help ensure a successful calving season.

Nutritional management

Adequate nutrition is critical during the last two months of gestation since most of the fetal growth occurs during this time. Keeping heifers separate from the mature cow herd is important from both nutritional and breeding management standpoints. Heifers are still growing and have higher nutrient requirements than mature cows. A beef female’s energy needs for maintenance, growth, and lactation must be met before energy is used for reproduction.

A cow or heifer that has just calved will require additional nutrients for the first few months after calving. Having cattle in proper body condition at calving will positively impact rebreeding rates. Cows and heifers in thin body condition at calving time are slower to rebreed, produce less colostrum, and are less likely to wean a live calf. Effective nutritional programs match forage and feed resources to animal nutrient requirements.

Avoiding calving difficulty

Calf losses associated with calving difficulty can be a train wreck for a herd of any size. In addition to calf losses, weak calves and longer postpartum intervals (the time between calving and return to cycling) can result from difficult calving. Underfeeding cows and heifers prior to calving will not decrease calving difficulty but can instead reduce calf vigor. Thin cattle may have difficulty calving if they lack muscle and stamina to expel the calf.

Avoiding calving difficulty starts long before calving season with proper bull selection, proper heifer development, and culling of females with extremely small pelvic openings. A calving ease bull should be mated to first-calf heifers. If a significant problem with calving difficulty has been experienced in the past, then it is time to reevaluate the herd sires being used. The old saying that a 60-pound live calf is better than a 100-pound dead calf still holds.

Place cows and heifers ready to calve in a pasture where they can be easily viewed and checked often. Research indicates that nighttime cattle feeding will result in most of the calves being born during daylight hours. It is a good idea to pay special attention to

first-calf heifers, since they are the most likely members of the herd to experience calving difficulty.

Check that all calving areas are clean and free of items that might injure cattle. Observe cattle frequently and have calf pulling and disinfectant supplies readily available. Calving assistance may be needed if reasonable progress stops after the feet or water bag appear. Contact a veterinarian if a calf cannot be safely delivered without help. After calving, monitor cows and heifers for retained placentas.

Calf processing

Once a calf hits the ground, make sure that it is breathing properly. Dip navel cords in a 7% iodine solution or use blue lotion spray to prevent infections. This is particularly important in heavily used calving grounds. Calves should be ear tagged at birth with a unique identification number so that they can be matched to their dams and properly identified for herd records. Calf birth date, sex, and birth weight, if possible, should be recorded at calving for use in herd improvement programs.

Make sure that the calf nurses properly. Signs that a calf has nursed include wet or curled hair around teats and a shiny appearance to teats. Calves need to receive colostrum as soon as possible after birth to build calf immunity and resistance to diseases such as scours and pneumonia. With each passing hour, the amount of colostrum in the dam's milk declines along with the calf's ability to absorb colostrum.

Know the signs of a sick calf: rapid breathing, scours, lowered head and ears, dry muzzle, inside of mouth cold to touch and abnormal posture to name a few. Move the cow-calf pair out to clean pasture as soon as possible to reduce disease exposure. Separating cows and heifers that have calved from their counterparts that have not calved also facilitates the use of nutritional programs that match the needs of each group.

Good management during the calving season will pay off when it comes time to market calves.

Profitable Pastures Seminars

If you have not come up with a good New Year's resolution yet, now is a good time to decide to attend one of the Profitable Pastures seminars offered this spring. Three of the top forage experts in the country will conduct these one-day seminars, which promise to be both educational and downright entertaining. The first one will be held Friday, March 12 at Mississippi State University, and the same program will be offered again on Saturday, March 13 at the Central Mississippi Research and Extension Center in Raymond.

For more information on calving management or the Profitable Pastures seminars, contact your local county Extension office or Jane Parish at 662-325-7466 or jparish@ads.msstate.edu.