

NEWS COLUMN

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Keeping Calves Healthy

Spring is here as many local producers are at the start of calving season. For the most part thus far, the weather has been cooperative however; it is still a long way to grass. Don't ignore calves as problems arise very quickly.

If the next thirty days are moderate in temperature swings and moisture, calf health will remain good but on the contrary, if we get a combination of extreme temperature swings and excessive moisture be prepared for problems. Young calves can go from perfect health to near death in a matter of a few hours. There is very little weight to them so dehydration and pneumonia can take over rapidly. Much of the average calf health condition has much to do with the condition of the calving area. Calves that are nursing cows with mud and manure free udders are highly likely to not have many problems. Calves that get a mouth full of mud and manure when nursing are going to get scours and some may quit nursing which causes rapid dehydration and possible hypothermia.

The following is a list of important things for consideration in keeping your calves healthy.

- Adequate colostrum intake- Calves need adequate colostrum (first milk) intake within 12 hours of birth. Colostrum contains antibodies that help calves ward off sickness and disease in the 1st stages of life. After 12 hours their ability to absorb these antibodies is significantly reduced. Calves with inadequate levels of colostrum have a 5 times greater risk of preweaning death, a 6 times greater risk of sickness in the first month and a 3 times greater risk of sickness prior to and after weaning. A minimum of 1 ½ quarts of colostrum is needed. Many calves will consume twice that.
- Monitor closely-Check young calves often. Look for signs of scours or calves that are not nursing. Calves health can decline fast. Getting them on the ground is just the start of the work. Also watch for problems such as quick pneumonia, navel infection and enterotoxemia-overeating.
- Bedding and room-Keeping cow udders clean is a must. Consider bedding or some extra acres to calve on. (both if possible) Keep cows out of the mud. If possible alleviate them even having to go near or walk through mud.
- Calving huts-If possible provide areas that calves can get out of the wind, rain, and snow. Keeping them dry and warm can be huge during 2-4 day wet/cold spells. Provide these areas with adequate bedding. Cows should not have access to these areas. Round bales set in semi circles with plywood over the top or flat beds/wagons surrounded by bales or plywood work well also. Hot wires that calves can walk under into tree belt or loafing area are some other ideas to consider.
- Health plan-Formulate a calf health plan with your local veterinarian. They are the professionals and have the experience and expertise to combat problems.
- Forget nurse calves from other sources-If you lose a calf, try and graft a twin or orphan from within your herd. There is a long list of cattle producers who have introduced disease pathogens such as scours from an outside herd calf addition.