

Spring Calving Considerations

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SPEAKERS

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C Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life. In this episode, I visit with Denise Schwab, Extension Beef Specialist for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Today, we're talking about spring calving considerations. I'm Christa Hartsook, Small Farms Program Coordinator, and we hope you enjoy the show. Denise, welcome. Thanks for being on.

D Denise Schwab 00:45

Thanks for having me.

C Christa Hartsook 00:47

So, Denise, we've started with our spring calving season. And the first thing that always comes to mind for me anyway, and my own heard is just the weather in and of itself. We've got a lot of variability in Iowa, what do we need to be concerned about there?

D Denise Schwab 01:02

Kind of two or three things come to mind for me. One is the temperature, which obviously we don't have much control over. But along with that is the moisture and the mud that it leads to. So I think it's really critical if we have the ability to scrape yards and scrape pens on a regular basis, that needs to be a high priority. And then bedding, we've got to be able to provide bedding to the cows and calves, to allow them to get out of the mud, and just think about how today's a great day as chilly as this rain is today. At least give them a dry place to lay. You know even better for the calves if we can provide them a crit pin, not that we need creep feed in it. But just a place that's dry and out of the wind, deep bedding, let those little guys get in

there, they find that that that creep area real quickly, and we just did a cow tip Tuesday on it, calling it cow calf condos. And and it's basically given those guys a place to get away from Mama, and to get dry and warm.

C Christa Hartsook 02:07

Really, today is a perfect example, as you talked about, there's just a lot of mud out there from a lot of rain this week. And obviously, we don't want cows dropping these calves in any kind of mud situation. So that bedding is really critical.

D Denise Schwab 02:20

Right. You know, and if you have the ability to have a calving pen, or what we kind of call a drop pin, that those cows, at least the ones that are closest to due, can get in that area, get a little protection, get where you can watch them a little closer. If you're home, most of us aren't home during the day or even through the night. So at least if we can get them in a dry bedded area to have those babies that's a big plus.

C Christa Hartsook 02:48

Absolutely. Denise, if we look at the cows themselves, let's say they haven't dropped those calves yet, how can we best be preparing them going into the spring calving season?

D Denise Schwab 02:59

So nutrition is really critical, especially late gestation. Now, obviously, we're probably at that. But if cows are a little bit thin, we really need to look at how can we supplement some additional energy in their diet, usually in the form for most guys, that's going to be in the form of a couple pounds of corn. But we know that body conditions, calving has the biggest impact on their ability to rebreed. So even if they're a little on the thin side at calving, but we start getting some additional energy into that diet going towards breeding season and towards peak lactation, that's really going to be a big plus. So if cows are looking a little bit thin, I always kind of use the rear ribs. If I can see a few ribs on the back of that cow, that's kind of a trigger that I want to look at maybe a little extra feed to her.

C Christa Hartsook 03:48

Absolutely. Denise says we're watching those cows right now, you know, I know you mentioned we're not always at home and a lot of us really aren't. So we're not there to check those cows on that regular basis. How often should we be doing that? And what do we need to do to best prepare those cows that are in labor?

D Denise Schwab 04:06

Well, ideally, I think we'd want to be checking cows about every two hours in our peak calving time. Having calving dates is a huge plus if we know when they're bred or if we do ultrasound, pregnancy check that really helps to give us a target date, and that's really valuable. But some of the things that you know, technology's gone a long ways now and some of these camera systems we can put in barns that go direct to your phone, if you're working off farm but you're close enough to be able to run out and check them on a regular basis or have those camera systems that's a huge plus. But the other thing and we've done a lot with the conical calving method that actually was really proven at Iowa State. Where if we provide cows, their bulk diets, the forages in the evening hours most of them will cab in the daytime. That's a plus, if we're home in the daytime, maybe not when we're working off farm, but at least it makes it easier to observe them and check them to. So that's always another technique, if you can work it into your system.

C Christa Hartsook 05:12

Absolutely. I know for us, they're always headed to that very back corner of the pasture too. So it's just making sure we're making those rounds to check in everything.

D Denise Schwab 05:22

You know, and some of it is, and you had a good point there, they always go to the back corner because they do want to isolate themselves. So close to calving season, we may want to give them a little bit smaller area, at least for those cows that haven't calved yet. And then once they do calve, we may want to move them to another pin. Obviously, we want to feed them a little different if they've already calved because lactation is a pretty high peak requirement for nutrition. But it also keeps him out of the creek bottoms and the far corners and makes night checks a lot easier if they're up close to the building site and can have an overhead light or a nightlight out there too.

C Christa Hartsook 06:00

Absolutely. Denise, at what point do we know if we need to intervene and assist anybody or call of that?

D Denise Schwab 06:07

So most of the time, we'll say if you see a water bay, and you don't see progress within an hour for heifers and a half hour for cows, it's probably time to investigate. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you go in and you physically help pull that calf, but we at least want to know is the progress slow because she's not dilating, because it's mal-presentation, because it's an extremely large calf? So if that 30 minutes on a cow, hour on a heifer, we want to be checking and see what's going on if we don't see progress. Obviously, if we see feet pointing up instead of pointing down or only one foot, check them right away. Don't delay on that one.

C Christa Hartsook 06:49

Absolutely. How about the calves themselves? Denise, when we have those new calves on the ground, what kind of considerations do we need to take or provide for them to give them the best start possible?

D Denise Schwab 07:00

Usually Mama's gonna do a good job because it's get them dry, get them up, get them nursing and oftentimes Mama will do that. But if we don't see that calf up within 30 to 60 minutes, we want to do a little intervention in help. Drying them off as one, if it's extremely cold, and we see a lot of cold stress, we want to get them dried off and warmed up and there's lots of ways we can do that. We probably want to check navels. So I think there's a lot of value to some kind of a disinfectant, whether it's iodine or chlorhexidine on the navel to prevent nasal infection, and then making sure they get colostrum. That's probably the number one thing is we want those calves to consume at least two quarts of colostrum in the first twelve hours. And that not only is going to keep that calf healthy now, but all the way to market. So colostrum really has to be a number one key.

C Christa Hartsook 07:59

Denise if we then kind of move a little bit forward with those calves and we're thinking vaccinations, you know, are there things that we need to be doing immediately for that calf?

D Denise Schwab 08:08

Well, I would say it always depends. And number one, your veterinarian is your best source. So have a conversation with your vet ahead of time to identify what are the problems in your area, what things do you need to be concerned about? As we said nasal infection is one. If we're banding calves for as a method of castration, we probably want to be thinking about tetanus and a tetanus injection just because of the risk with tetanus infection on those banded calves. But otherwise, it's really what's been the program. You know, if your vet knows the health, maybe it's an vitamin or mineral injection, sometimes it's important, sometimes it isn't. In terms of stimulating the immune response, though, really that that colostrum is going to give our immune response to calves. And that maternal response is going to be controlling for quite a while. So a lot of times our vaccines aren't going to give us much advantage early in life until that maternal antibody starts to wear off. So again, talk with your vet, they know your operation, and go from what they tell you. But those are some things to think about.

C Christa Hartsook 09:21

Denise, you talked a little bit about banding and I know that's a pretty common practice pretty quick, pretty early for a lot of our producers out there. Obviously that's a little bit of a stressor on that calf. Are there some kind of best practices that we need to think about in terms of banding, tagging, you know, handling those calves much in the beginning?

D Denise Schwab 09:40

D Denise Schwab 09:40

Well, from a standpoint of banding is a good practice. There is pain related to it, but it's very relatively short term. And as I've done some long term studies have kind of determined that the short term pain of banding is much less than the impact of knife castration later in life. So, probably banding is still a good technique, the main thing is to count to two make sure you get two, if you don't get two below the band, then we have a problem. So that's a big part of it there in terms of that practice. In terms of tagging, and, you know, most we don't have to do a lot of dehorning anymore. Although paste de-horning is an option. Again, the pain sensors and those newborn calves is much lower than it is later in life, I would say the main thing is to think about how we handle those calves, and so we don't get mama excited. That's for our safety as much as for the calf safety, but handling that calf in a way that that they don't get overly excited. They don't associate human contact with pain and aggression.

C Christa Hartsook 10:54

Denise, what else do we need to be thinking about going into this spring season?

D Denise Schwab 10:58

I would say that the other thing that I would suggest is get your kit, your calving kit together now, ahead of time, instead of waiting until, we always almost seem to wait till that first calf arrives. And then oh my gosh, where are the chains, where the handle, where is the jack, where's the iodine? So get your kit together, have it in a location that's handy, close by, for, you know, whoever is out checking. So if it's in dad's truck, and Dad's not home, and mom's out there, the kids are out checking, we need to have it in a place that's handy. And things like you know, just some extra towels, those chains, make sure the chains are in good condition that they're not rusted up from last year. If we have very many cows, I think it's probably worthwhile to have at least one dose of colostrum replacer on hand. In that case, where a cow or heifer has no milk, or maybe dies in the process, we want to make sure we get that replaced or in that calf within 12 hours. If we have some situations where maybe a calf is kind of slow, isn't getting up with a difficult birth, we may want to give them half a dose or replacer as kind of a supplemental colostrum dosage. And so that always works as well. So just getting some of those kinds of things. I would also add that on our Iowa Beef Center page, we have an online calving manual that talks about everything from you know that cow nutrition all the way up to calf care, and that that first week or two of life. So that's a really good resource that's available on Iowa Beef Center page. And if we have the ability, most guys don't, but if we have the ability to split our cow herd so that we keep those early calving cows in a group and a later calving cows in a group, or maybe we split with thin and and better condition cows, but trying to group calves by birth date is real valuable. It's kind of a modification of the Sandhills calving system. But trying to keep them with kind of like we do in preschool. We have the three three year olds in a separate class than the four and five year olds because, yeah, they're all a little bit different stage of immune status. So kind of that same system with the calving herd.

C Christa Hartsook 13:16

That makes sense. Denise, how can they find that Iowa Beef Center would be center page want to give us that URL?

D Denise Schwab 13:21

Sure. Just go to iowabeefcenter.org, all lowercase all one word. And right now it's the first article on our homepage. Because of the timing, if not go to the cow calf section and it should be one of the first things at the top there and it's all online. So you can download whatever sections of that are of most interest to you.

C Christa Hartsook 13:42

Alright, Denise, thanks so much for being on today. We appreciate it.

D Denise Schwab 13:45

No problem. Thanks for having me.

S Speaker 3 13:47

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