News Column
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CALVING DIFFICULTY

I was two rooms away, but I could hear the screen door bang closed, and then the slamming of the creaky wooden door on the back porch of the old stone house. Then there was the sound of three stomps of soggy high-top overshoes on the cold porch floor. It was a familiar sound and I knew what was about to happen.

The kitchen door flew open and banged against the metal cart sitting behind the door. At the same moment, I heard my dad's booming voice belting out, "Greg, come help me!"

I knew the routine. A heifer was calving and needed help. Now!

I also knew my job. I was going to be the crank operator on the calf puller. I would crank when I was told, stop when I was told to stop, and mostly keep my mouth shut.

I had just started high school, but I was already a well-trained assistant. We had done this far too many times before. You see, we were in the game early, breeding Angus cows to Simmental bulls before calving ease EPD's existed. That worked well, but greed caused us to breed the half-blood heifers to Simmental bulls,....and you now the result.

While not the only cause of calving problems, birth weight is often a part of the problem when calving issues arise. Birth weight can be affected by several factors, including genetics, gestation length, and even nutrition.

High calving ease sires typically have a shortened gestation length, resulting in calves that are lighter at birth. On average, calves will gain 1.5 to 2 pounds per day in late gestation. A calf

born a week early will often weight 10-14 pounds less than calves born at the standard 283 days of gestation. As expected, that smaller calf is more likely to be born unassisted.

Another factor that affects birth weight is cold stress. Birth weights of calves born in the winter or spring are usually heavier than for calves born in the fall. A Nebraska study that evaluated six years of data found that for each one degree lower average winter temperature (December through February) calf birth weight increased one pound.

The increase in birth weight in colder winters is likely the result of an increase in nutrients consumed by the cow, to stay warm and survive during the colder weather. If providing more feed leads to bigger calves, then you might be tempted to just provide the normal amount of feed to make sure the developing calf doesn't get too big.

As you would expect, that theory has been tried. Both producers and researchers have tried to manage calf birth weight through cow nutrition. While it has been proven to be a bad idea, the logic was to control calf size by restricting feed, with hopes of decreasing calving difficulty.

A study done at Kansas State University in the 70's found that heifers that were fed 67% of their nutritional requirement had 7% fewer calves born alive, half as many return to estrus within 40 days post-calving, and calves that were 25 pounds lighter at weaning. In addition, the heifer calves from the restricted feed group reached puberty 20 days later than the control group.

Studies have also been conducted with heifers being fed slightly higher nutrition than required and those studies concluded that slightly higher nutrition than required did not affect calving ease.

While I'm convinced a well-fed heifer will yield much better calving results than heifers that are kept somewhat thin to try to control calf size, there is a point of caution. Excessive

protein supplementation has been shown to increase calving difficulty in one out of five studies. The other four studies showed no increased calving difficulty from excessive protein supplementation.

Don't make the mistake of under feeding heifers during the last trimester. Even if the calves are a bit heavier than calves coming from thin heifers, research indicates you will have fewer calving problems, more live calves, and heavier calves at weaning.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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