Common Management Techniques for a Successful Calving Season

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What is Successful Calving?

- “Normal Calving”
- What to Expect with each Stage of Labor
- Calving Prep Tips
- Patience.
What is “Normal Calving”

- The actual process of calving covers 3 stages and can last up to 20 hours – length varies between cows and heifers
  - Stage 1: Preparatory Stage (2 to 12 hours)
  - Stage 2: Expulsion of the Fetus – Delivery of the Calf (60 minutes to 4 hours)
  - Stage 3: Expulsion of the Placenta (1 to 12 hours)
Stage 1: Preparatory (Cows 2-8hrs, Heifers 4-12hrs) – Calf is prepping to enter the birth canal.

- **What’s happening inside:**
  - Fetal cortisol (stress hormone) starts a chain reaction causing uterine contractions.
  - As uterine pressure increases, the fetus rotates so front feet and head are positioned at the cervix.
  - Uterine contractions increase, pushing the fetus toward the dilating cervix – allowing for the fetus to enter the birth canal.

- **What to look for:**
  - Signs of discomfort – restlessness, arching of the back, slight straining, kicking at the belly
  - Cows will separate themselves from the herd and urinate more frequently
  - Fully alert, may still eat, drink and otherwise behave normally

**Stage 1 ends with expulsion of the water bag.**

A. Beginning of stage 1 – cervix is closed. B. Dilation allowing the fetus to enter the birth canal. Oregon Calving School Handbook, 2008
Stage 2: Fetal Expulsion (Cows 60 minutes, Heifers 1-4hrs) - Delivery of the Calf

- What’s happening with the Cow/Heifer:
  - Fetus in the birth canal puts pressure on the cervix and induces the reflex to push – visible abdominal contractions
  - Pressure of feet and head in the birth canal results in rupture of water bag – helping lubrication
  - Contractions strengthen and cows may lie down to cope with pain and discomfort

- How delivery progresses for the calf:
  - Front Feet – *Soles of feet should be facing down*
    - Abdominal contractions become more frequent and intense. Progress may slow down for a few minutes to allow vulva to stretch
  - Nose
  - Rest of the Head
  - Shoulders
  - Chest
    - Mucus may come out of the calf’s mouth and nostrils this clears the respiratory passages for normal breathing
  - The Rest of the Calf
    - Within 10 minutes, the cow should be standing and licking off the calf. Calf should be working on standing within 20-30 minutes and nursing within 60 minutes post-birth.
Stage 3: Expulsion of the Placenta (1-12 hours)

- The placenta should detach from the uterus almost immediately after the calf is delivered
  - Cotyledons (buttons) on the placenta separate from the caruncles on the uterus
  - Contractions expel the placenta from the cow
    - Expulsion can be delayed because of fatigue, but it isn’t considered retained unless it’s over 12 hours
Calving Prep Tips

- **Konefal Method (Named for Gus Konefal a Canadian Rancher)**
  - Study by the University of Iowa found that feeding once a day at dusk (between 4-6pm) 85.28% of calves were born between 6am-6pm

- **Maintain Detailed Calving Records**
  - Information to maintain: Due Date, Sire, Actual Calving Date, Time of Day She Started, Time Water Broke, When Feet Appeared, Delivery Complete (How Long it Took), Sex of Calf, Anything Abnormal, Notes
  - Will help in future years to know what’s “normal” for each animal

- Make sure your calving area is ready (if indoors) and your calving kit is clean and equipped for the upcoming season.
Patience:

These things take time – let them.
Continued progress is progress.