



Prepare Your Farm for Calving Season

Take a look at cow nutrition, farm facilities and herd health to set your cows up for successful calving.

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Photo courtesy USDA/ Scott Bauer

Ensure your cows consume the proper amounts of protein, vitamins and minerals so they bare healthy calves. As you take care of winter chores around your small farm, make sure to add conditioning cows for calving to your list.

Calves born with any sort of difficulty at birth are four times more likely to die than those without, which is why conditioning cows is extremely important, says Ron Lemenager, a beef nutrition specialist at Purdue University.

As the spring calving season approaches, small farmers should look at three key factors to prepare cows to calve.

1. Implement Proper Cow Nutrition

Cows need to be in the right body condition so they have enough energy for calving. Lemenager recommends a body condition score of 5 for cows and a body condition score of 5½ to 6 for heifers.

"Making sure cows have proper nutrition also will ensure a higher quality colostrum, or first milk after calving, which gives the calf disease protection and a dense nutrient supply," he says.

Proper cow nutrition includes a diet high enough in energy for the cow to have a normal calving experience, which means feeding it the right protein content, vitamins and minerals. However, with the rainy hay season in 2009, poor hay quality may mean farmers need to supplement cow diets.

"Producers should get an analysis of their hay and then develop a supplementation strategy," Lemenager says. "It's also important that the cow has access to a high-quality, free choice mix of vitamins and minerals, which is commercially available."

Nutritionally speaking, one thing farmers need to keep an eye on is the amount of dried distillers grains they feed their cows. Because DDGs are high in protein, farmers should feed them to cows to meet protein needs, not energy needs. If the cow consumes too much protein, the calf's birth weight and blood nitrogen levels will increase, Lemenager says. This can negatively affect the conception rate and embryo survival.

"Using distillers grains beyond protein requirements can cause a sulfur toxicity," Lemenager says. "At high levels, sulfur also can complex with other minerals, like copper, which is an extremely important mineral for reproduction."

2. Assess Calving Facilities

In addition to conditioning cows, farmers should prepare their facilities to house newborn calves in inclement weather—something Lemenager says is extremely important for calf survival.

3. Vaccinate for Calf Scours

If there is a history of calf scours among the cows on your farm, Lemenager recommends working with a veterinarian to create a vaccination strategy for the cows so they will provide passive immunity to the calf through high quality colostrum. Read more about preventing calf scours.