

BY DESIGN

Creative solutions for the calving season

by Reinaldo Cooke, Texas A&M University



Efficient and safe calving facilities rely on good design, as I covered last month. The

headcatch is a central point of that, especially when a dam requires assistance. Several design options are available for purchase, but the following are details to consider.

The headcatch needs to have straight side bars and open all the way to the ground, allowing the dam to lie down while calving without the risk of choking. The area in front of the headcatch needs to be well-lit and open to encourage the dam to move forward and be restrained with minimal stress.

A custom-made wooden headcatch can be built at reduced cost and match the properties of existing calving facilities. The example provided in Fig. 1 can be built between two 8-inch (in.) posts in the fenceline or inside a calving barn. The headcatch can be equipped with a rope that locks the head of the dam from the side or the rear if needed.

After calving is complete, make sure the headcatch is fully open to allow the dam to get up, back out, and turn around to find the calf and mother-up. If the dam fails to care for the calf, it's critical to help the newborn in a timely manner. Three main topics should be considered.

► **Check whether the calf can breathe.** Clear the nostrils of mucus, and then tickle the inside of a nostril with a piece of straw. The calf will sneeze, clear out remaining mucus, and breathing will be stimulated. Do not hang the calf upside down to drain mucus and fluids. This puts too much pressure on the calf's diaphragm and hampers breathing.

If the calf does not breathe

on its own, clamp its mouth and one of the nostrils with your hand, and blow into the other nostril every 6 seconds. You can purchase calf respirators that can be used to stimulate/facilitate breathing. Rub the calf's body rhythmically to stimulate blood circulation.

► **Treat the navel to prevent infections.** Use a strong iodine solution to dehydrate the navel, particularly if calves are born in muddy and wet conditions. Some iodine solutions need

veterinary prescription; an over-the-counter option is a chlorhexidine solution.

► **Calf needs colostrum.** Ensure the calf gets colostrum within 3 hours after it is born, as colostrum is their only source of immunity against many diseases. A calf should consume about 10% of its birth weight in colostrum during the first 24 hours of life (i.e., 1 gallon of colostrum for an 85-pound calf), which is the only period when calves are able to absorb

colostrum immunoglobulins. If available, excess colostrum can be frozen and stored for future use in other calves.

If colostrum is obtained from dairy farms, use a colostrometer to test the quality of the colostrum and ensure that the source is free of major diseases. |

Editor's note: "By Design" is a regular column of the *Angus Beef Bulletin* featuring facility and homestead design for cattlemen. Reinaldo Cooke is a professor of beef cattle production at Texas A&M University.

Fig. 1: Example of custom-made wooden headcatch for calving

