

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Calving success is not a given; prepare now

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



The 2-a.m. calving check on Easter morning had fallen to me and, as the spotlight scanned the first-calf heifer

pasture, all seemed to be well. Most were chewing their cud, resting contentedly in their late-winter coats only mildly interested in my disturbance of their peace.

As the light found the last corner of the paddock, it illuminated a heifer in the early stages of labor — her bag of waters just beginning to emerge. With no signs of trouble, I left her to her labors and returned to the barn to check on the few pairs requiring more care. However, upon returning an hour later to check on the heifer's progress, I found her flat on her side straining mightily but with no apparent progress.

I approached her, encouraged her to stand and slowly walked her to the barn. Secure in the calving pen, I felt for the calf only to find a jumble of legs and hooves — a malpresentation that proved to be beyond my capacity. It was time to call in the cavalry, and the veterinarian was summoned.

We went to work in the dark of predawn and struggled to sort out

legs in search of his first meal. It was a scene etched into memory — new life brought into the world with struggle and challenge.

Of the thousands of cattle delivered under our family's care, this birth is the most memorable. I suspect that we all have those stories that remind us of the challenging yet extraordinary nature of calving season. Of all the seasons that intertwine to create ranch life, the promise of a new calf crop is the most powerful experience. Yet, success is not a given, and perhaps there is no more important time of year to reduce risk by thoughtful execution of an integrated plan.

Calving management

While each cow herd has its own unique challenges and needs, there are several management concepts that provide the foundation for a successful calving season:

1. Schedule calving checks so people don't become excessively fatigued. Our experience has been that we make more mistakes when people are exhausted.
2. Feed in the late afternoon or evening to facilitate more cows having calves in the daytime.
3. Strive for the vast majority of cows to calve under pasture conditions, but maintain a workable set of facilities for

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the chaos of a most difficult birth. Then, just as the first light of Easter morning streamed in through the translucent roof panels of the barn — success! The calf presented sufficiently to allow us to bring him into the world. We cleared his airway, stimulated his breathing and stood back as he rose on wobbly

those cases where birthing intervention is required.

4. Have access to a trusted veterinarian, both to develop an effective herd health plan and to provide emergency service when needed.
5. Know the limits of your team when it comes to intervening in



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6. Keep the pace slow and steady. Reactive decisions are the least likely to yield positive results.
 7. As the calving season progresses, create a system that allows cows to calve on fresh ground to minimize cross-contamination from older calves.
 8. Communicate with the neighbors to maintain awareness of any calving disease challenges being encountered on the perimeter of the ranch.
 9. Do not bring outside calves onto the ranch to be fostered to cows that have lost calves.
 10. Develop and communicate an emergency plan of action relative to severe weather. Having a functional strategy is critical to the health of the cow herd and the crew.
- In the midst of calving and the stress that is sure to be present, I hope you can take time to experience the joy of new life. What a privilege it is to experience new beginnings this calving season. |

Editor's note: In "Outside the Box," a regular column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.