

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Calving Season Preparation

I once heard an old cowboy say that the best way to avoid losing calves to hypothermia of a January blizzard was calving in April or May - I can follow that logic. Everyone has an opinion on the “right” time to calve cows (*or birthing of any specie for that matter*), which can be an article by itself. My purpose today is to get you thinking about preparing for calving season, regardless of when that might be for your operation. If you’d like to learn more on this topic of birthing, I’d invite you to attend the K-State Calving School **January 11, 6:00 pm** at the Northeast Kansas Heritage Complex, Holton. Register by January 8 online at: <https://tinyurl.com/ksucalvingschoolholton> or by calling the Holton office of Meadowlark District at 785-364-4125.

Preparing for calving season should not be something you think about as the first water bag presents itself in the first heifer. There are many things that need to be considered from nutrition, health, equipment, facilities and cowboy knowledge. Here are some of the important factors to review and consider prior to calving season.

- Herd health planning. Preparing for calving gives a perfect opportunity to visit with your veterinarian on identifying critical control points where management could reduce risk and cost effectively improve herd health. If your herd has historical health or disease issues, work with your vet on proper preventative vaccinations and disease mitigation planning.
- Nutrition matters! Adequate nutrition during the last trimester of pregnancy and especially the last 50-60 days prior to calving is important. Acceptable body condition impacts stamina during delivery, quality of colostrum, calf vigor, and also impacts subsequent rebreeding. Two-year-old heifers and three-year-old cows are especially vulnerable during this time period as they are still growing. Higher quality feed, with adequate energy and protein at this time is critical.
- Calving facilities and equipment. Inspect gates, pens, alleys and head catches; servicing, fixing or replacing broken items. Give pens and facilities a good cleaning and disinfecting. Inevitably, a percentage of cows will calve at night. Good lighting is critical for night calving and inside enclosed buildings, make sure lights are in working order with replacement bulbs handy.
- Provide wind protection in clean and dry environments. Wet, muddy conditions are stressful both to cows and calves. This environment also provides a situation where disease spread is more likely to happen. When possible, providing a clean, dry place for calves and cows to lay down will reduce stress and promote calf health. Supplemental bedding needs to be on hand.
- Check calving supplies. Make sure you have on hand plastic sleeves, obstetrical lube, obstetrical chains or straps, esophageal feeders and calf feeding bottles. Inventory halters, ropes, and other cattle handling tools needed. Make sure the calf puller is clean and working properly, hopefully not to be needed. Test flashlights or spotlights to make sure they are working as well.
- Keep colostrum or colostrum replacement products on inventory. Quality colostrum consumption by the calf shortly after birth is foundational for the calf’s lifelong health. Calves experiencing a difficult delivery are less likely to timely nurse and will benefit from receiving colostrum shortly after birth via a bottle or esophageal feeder. The best source of colostrum your own herd, ideally the mother. Colostrum replacement products can be a good option when calves are not vigorous, after stress or when there is poor maternal bonding.
- Review the stages of calving and understand when further examination and assistance is needed. Again, the primary purpose of the upcoming K-State calving school! Our Nebraska neighbors have a good publication called [Assisting the Beef Cow at Calving Time](#) that provides good information on this topic as well.