

Ross Mosteller  
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

## **When Do You Call the Vet?**

The title of this article is a good question and one that even the most experienced cowboy finds themselves asking from time to time. I have already seen a few babies on the ground, and with spring calving season coming in full force within the next several weeks, it feels like a good time to discuss calving assistance timing. A first step is to have a good working relationship with a large animal veterinarian through a VCPR (veterinarian-client-patient-relationship).

Ranchers tend to be a very self-reliant bunch, often not asking for help. It is no surprise that one of a beef producers' biggest calving dilemmas is when to call the veterinarian for help. The goal is to get a live calf, but often worry about "calling too soon." Ask any vet and my guess is that they will tell you "calling too soon" seldom happens. "If only you'd called a few hours earlier," is a more likely response from the veterinarian who delivers a dead calf.

So, when is it time to assist the calving cow or heifer, and when is it then time to call for extra assistance? Current knowledge is that Stage 2 labor (delivery of the calf) occurs more quickly than previously thought. A cow should make significant progress every 30 minutes between stages, while a heifer should do the same in 30-60 minutes. Extended time during delivery without significant progress puts undue stress on the calf and the cow.

Stage 1 labor is the period of behavioral differences such as restlessness, isolation or discomfort, elevation/switching of the tail, and increased mucous discharge due to cervix dilation. Stage 1 can take as much as six hours, but that doesn't mean every female should be allowed to labor for six hours. Every cow progresses differently, which means that "eye of the master" or relying on past experiences for timing to intervene, often determines the calf's fate.

If a cow or heifer isn't making progress, first do a vaginal exam to assess the situation. Be sure to clean the cow's vulva and wear a plastic obstetrical glove to prevent infection. Many situations encountered can be corrected and the calf can be delivered. Some examples include situations where the calf is slightly large and the vagina isn't dilated, leading to manual dilation; or when the calf has one foot back, leading to gently, manually extending the foot/leg.

Other times, palpation may yield a situation totally new to you. That's an obvious indication to not proceed and to call for help. A second reason is when the problem is discovered, like a breech or tail-first delivery, but you're unable to correct it. Such cases are truly emergencies, and the quicker the problem is corrected the better likelihood of getting a live calf. The third reason to call for help is when both the problem and the solution are known, but making significant progress, in a timely manner, isn't being achieved. If you've tried for 30 minutes without progress, call for help. Pulling harder is never the best option.

Often, these difficult cases can be resolved by a team consisting of the owner, the veterinarian and a calf jack. Others can only be resolved with surgery. Don't consider a cesarean as a last-straw option, but rather as a tool for the most difficult dystocias. If the calf is alive at the start of the surgery, generally a live calf and a live cow can get through a C-section. Rebreeding rate can be as low as 50% on C-sectioned cows, but keeping cows who've had extreme calving difficulty isn't a good goal for the operation and these cows are likely targets to cull.

Veterinarians are always happy to have clients report that all their calves came unassisted and all are alive. They are equally happy to assist with those more difficult cases, and the sooner the better. Oklahoma State University has a good publication discussing this topic called ["Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers" E-1006](#) that provides additional information on this topic.