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Parturition Pending

Driving the countryside at this time of year, you start to notice the next generation of life springing as newborn baby calves can be seen paired with mothers in calving pastures or pens. It is an annual amazement to me to watch the process of bringing the next calf crop into this world. Generally speaking, cows are better left alone for the process of parturition, but there are certainly times when assistance is needed, particularly referencing heifers. Knowing the signs of impending calving can help with the decision-making process of stepping in to help or not.

As calving season approaches, cows will show typical signs that will indicate parturition is forthcoming. Indications that gestation is reaching an endpoint will develop subtly but are consistent markers that calving time is approaching. The main signs are seen in udder development, sometimes referred to as “making a bag” and the relaxation and swelling of the vulva or “springing.” Cows will often look like they are carrying calves with bolder spring of rib and a fuller appearing body capacity. This isn’t necessarily only attributable to pregnancy but is another sign to determine if the cow has a growing fetus on board.

There are many differences between individuals in the development of these signs with age being a factor. First calf heifers, especially those with higher milk production potential, develop udders longer, sometimes for two or three months before parturition. The timing of springing can be highly variable among individuals as well.

Typically, in the immediate two weeks preceding calving, springing becomes more evident, the udder fills, and one of the things that might be observed is the loss of the cervical plug. This is a very thick tenacious, mucous material hanging from the vulva. It may be seen pooling behind the cow when she is lying down. Some people mistakenly think this happens immediately before calving, but in fact this can be seen weeks before parturition and therefore is only another sign that the calving season is here.

Within 24 hours of calving, more immediate signs that usually occur are relaxation of the pelvic ligaments and strutting of the teats. While these are notable signs for the experienced manager, these could be missed by a more casual or unexperienced observer. The relaxation of the pelvic ligaments can’t be observed in fat cows, but it can be seen very clearly in thin or moderate body condition cows and can be a clue of parturition within the next 12 - 24 hours.

These changes are signs the herd manager can use to more closely determine calving timing. Strutting of teats can be highly variable as well, with some cows strutting for days and others calving without this indicator. Another thing that might be seen in the immediate 12 hours before calving would be variable cow behavior. These are things such as a cow that does not come up to eat, or that isolates herself into a particular corner of the pasture. However, most cows have few behavioral changes until the parturition process starts.

If the cowherd manager knows the signs of impending parturition, focus can be given to the cows most likely to need assistance. The more cows are allowed to be undisturbed, the easier it will be to pick up on these calving clues. As stated earlier, most calves are born without issue but always be prepared to intervene when problems arise. Oklahoma State University has an excellent publication called [Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers E-1006](#) that served as a reference for this article and contains a wealth of calving information for those wanting to learn more.