

One of the most rewarding and fulfilling sights a cattle producer may witness is the birth of a live, healthy calf. As you know, not all births go as planned, and this is why dystocia, a slow or difficult labor or delivery, should be at the forefront of a producer's mind as he/she continues to prepare for calving season.

Once labor begins in adult cows, the entire labor/delivery process should not last more than about four hours. Ideally, the calf's feet should be visible within thirty minutes of when the first signs of active labor (straining and acting uncomfortable) take place. The calf should be born approximately thirty minutes after its feet are seen. Because heifers are less experienced and typically not as strong as cows, they are expected to have a longer labor/delivery process, totaling about six hours. Within sixty to ninety minutes of observing the first signs of active labor in heifers, the calf's feet should be visible. The calf should be born about an hour later.

Unfortunately, cattle will not always calve within the time frames indicated above. If the cow or heifer is in labor for an extended period of time and is not making any progress, she should be assisted. Before attempting to pull the calf, the rancher should positively identify the calf's nose and both front legs. If all three cannot be identified, a veterinarian should be contacted as soon as possible to ensure that the calf is delivered as safely and quickly as possible.

A serious and potentially fatal form of dystocia that may occur is due to breech births. This is when the calf's back legs, rather than the front legs and head, are positioned to be delivered first. Cows or heifers with a breeched calf may stay in the first stage of labor for several hours or days without making any progress because the calf is not able to go up into the birth canal. This is why it is important that the cattle be checked frequently in order to be sure they are going through the stages of labor in a timely manner, and even more important to make sure the calf is being delivered the correct way before giving assistance.

During calving season, it may be wise to check your cattle first thing in the morning, throughout the day, and at dark, as this will help minimize potential calving issues that may arise. A good management practice to put into place is to feed and pen the cattle in a small lot every night that is near the working pens/chute. Studies show that cattle fed hay late in the evening (around 8pm) will eat their fill until about midnight, at which point they will lay down and rest for a few hours. If the cow is going to calve, she will likely go into labor and have her calf delivered by daylight. Management practices like this one are ideal because the cattle are in an easy to access lot where they can be checked briefly at midnight, then again at daylight. Using this management practice, if any calving problems are spotted at daylight, the cow has most likely not been in labor for very long, leaving adequate time for the producer to examine the cow and determine which course of action should be taken. Cattle in the night feeding lot that do not appear to be in labor should be turned out into the normal pasture during the day.

Knowing what to look for is key in determining if the cow or heifer is in labor. Cattle that are soon to calve will often have changes in behavior. She will likely keep to herself by staying away from the rest of the herd. She may also be identified as the cow that is doing something different than the rest of the cattle.

For more information regarding dystocia, or for assistance with delivering calves, please contact us.