Extension Cattle Call

Stanly County Livestock Market- Norwood

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Twins

Laura Elmore, Agriculture Agent, Iredell County

Twin births occur in 1 to 7 percent of cattle depending on the breed and genetics. Though twins can be fairly rare, it is beneficial to prepare for the possibility of twin births prior to the calving season. Twins are often a source of headache for beef cattle producers. Many times, a cow will reject one calf leaving it as an orphan. Also, cows that do raise twins will often get pulled down during lactation and will rebreed later than the rest of the herd.

According to the USDA Meat Animal Research Center, as long as there is good nutrition, there is only a 10% difference between the weights of twin calves and singles at weaning resulting in a higher income per cow. However, there are cons to having twins. Cows that deliver twins are twice as likely to encounter calving difficulties and have much larger nutrient requirements throughout lactation.

Cows can be placed in stalls with the twins for the first 24 hours after birth to increase bonding. Often times, when a calf is rejected, that calf can be fostered on to another cow that has recently lost her calf. The cow can be encouraged to accept the orphan by rubbing the scent of the cow's dead calf on the orphaned twin then leaving them in a pen so the calf can nurse.

Should you encounter twins in your herd here are some tips for how to proceed:

- Be there to help deliver the calves if needed
- Keep the cow and twins in a small pen for at least 24 hours to encourage bonding
- Give the twins extra colostrum
- Wean the twins at 6 months of age or sooner depending on available nutrition
- Feed the cow well and maintain her body condition score while she is nursing the twins
- Do not save a heifer born twin to a bull as a replacement. She will most likely be sterile.

Retained Placenta in Cows

John Cothren, Agriculture Agent, Wilkes County

The placenta (or afterbirth) is the name given to the membranes that transfer nutrients from the cow to the calf before the calf (fetus) is born. These membranes and blood vessels are made by the calf and connect to the blood supply in the uterus of the cow or heifer. The cotyledons (buttons) of the placenta "hook up" to the caruncles of the uterus. It is across this thin connection between the membranes of the cow and the membranes of the calf that essential materials pass to the developing calf. These essential materials include oxygen, blood sugar (glucose), amino acids (the building blocks of proteins), fats, calcium, phosphorus, vitamins, trace minerals and all the other essential components of life.

When the calf is born the placenta normally detaches within a few hours and is expelled. That is why it is referred to as the "afterbirth". In most all situations, the placenta is expelled within 12 hours of the birth of the calf. If it is not expelled by 24 hours it is defined as a retained placenta or the cow is said to "have not cleaned".

In and of itself the retained placenta is not a problem. However, the retention creates a number of potential problems. The retained placenta "hangs" out of the vulva and as the cow walks the placenta slides back and forth through the external opening of the vulva and vagina and "sucks" material into the uterus. The vulva of a cow is located just below the anus, so fecal material and fecal microorganisms are pulled into the uterus. Also, when a cow lays down the placenta will hang out further and lay in the dirt or mud, which is loaded with bacteria. These bacteria set up an active site of infection in the uterus and this can have serious consequences for the cow. The local infection in the uterus can cause the animal to become ill (fever, weight loss, etc). Sometimes the infection is so bad the cow can actually die. When the uterus becomes infected and inflamed, it takes much longer for the cow to "clean" and to be ready for the next breeding season.

A retained placenta usually causes the cow to have an increased time from calving to the conception of the next calf. It is not uncommon for a cow with a retained placenta to delay the next pregnancy for 2-6 months. Obviously, a two-month delay will mean a late calving date in the following year. A six-month delay may result in an open cow next year at pregnancy checking time. Another result of retained placenta can be tetanus. The tetanus organism is commonly in the soil or in the feces and when it gets into the uterus it can set up an infection and result in tetanus (lockjaw). Tetanus can be fatal in cattle and at the minimum requires long term therapy (1-3 months).

The list of potential causes is quite long; however, there are a number of common causes that affect beef cattle.

- Difficult birth (calf too large for cow, backwards calf [breech birth], one leg or head backwards)
- Twins
- Cesarean section
- Energy or Protein Deficiency during pregnancy
- Vitamin A , Vitamin E, Selenium, Iodine deficiency
- Stress (Transportation or rough handling, poor feed conditions)
- Obesity
- Heredity

If a cow has a retained placenta of 24-48 hours and is running a fever (rectal temperature over 102.5 degrees Fahrenheit) or is not eating it should receive attention and treatment. The minimum treatment would be an antibiotic such as a long-acting tetracycline (Biomycin®, LA-200®, Tetradure®, etc) and Lutalyse® (which can help to speed expulsion of the placenta). If the cow is depressed or dehydrated it will be necessary to have your veterinarian examine and treat the cow. They will probably flush the uterus as well as give you advice on other drugs to use over the next 5-7 days. Always seek your veterinarian's advice on treating cows with retained placenta as the condition can deteriorate into a life-threatening one in a very short period of time.

It is usually not necessary to manually remove the placenta; however, your veterinarian can advise you better after examining the animal. It is important to understand that there is no single course of treatment that will be safe and effective in every circumstance; thus your veterinarian's advice will be crucial to success. Additionally, if you have more than 1% of your cattle with retained placenta, you should seek professional help to prevent this problem.