

Brutal Calving Season

This weather has been brutal for those trying to calve. First off, fighting the snowstorms each week, and now the rain and mud. I'm fearful that the results will be higher calf deaths. Surveys show that mortality in beef herds from birth to weaning ranges from 3 to 7 percent. A few years ago, when there was a USDA livestock emergency program, you had to have over a 4% loss to get payment. The majority of normal deaths occur within the first 24 hours of life. Slow and difficult births (dystocia) and cold stress are the leading causes of death, during this period. Proper care and treatment of the cold stressed calf can prevent this.

There are two types of hypothermia or cold stress, exposure and immersion. Exposure hypothermia is the steady loss of body heat in a cold environment through respiration, evaporation and lack of adequate hair coat, body flesh or weather protection. This type of hypothermia affects all classes of livestock but particularly affects young, old and thin animals.

Immersion hypothermia is the rapid loss of body heat due to a wet, saturated hair coat in a cold environment. Immersion hypothermia often occurs after the birthing process because the calf is born saturated with uterine fluids. This also can occur if they are born in deep snow, or wet ground, falling into a creek or heavy rains.

What does hypothermia look like? The body tries to defend itself in two ways: shivering to increase muscle heat production, and blood shunting to reduce heat loss by diverting blood flow away from the body extremities to the body core. A cold nostril and pale cold hooves are early signs that blood is being shunted away from the body extremities. Erratic behavior, confusion, clumsy are all signs of mild hypothermia. We often call these "dummy" calves.

Severe hypothermia results as the body temperature drops below 94 degrees F. After the shivering stops, it is replaced by muscle rigidity. The pulse and respiration begins to slow as the body core cools to 88 degrees F. Below 94 degrees, the vital organs are beginning to get cold. As the brain cools, they become unconscious. Below 86 degrees, signs of life are difficult to detect and may be mistaken for dead. This happened just last week, I happened to see a movement. We were able to warm this calf up and save it (so far).

Warm these calves up to 100 degrees, feed them some warm colostrum as soon as possible. Warming and drying boxes are on the market, or make your own. I've seen plywood boxes 3 X 4 foot, I've seen totes turned into calf boxes, anything can work. Heat sources can be electrical heaters, heat lamps or propane. It is

recommended that a fan be included in construction to circulate the warm air. Lack of ventilation and shut offs are often a problem, with homemade units. As the hair coat dries, moisture raises the humidity in the box. This can lead to pneumonia. If the calf is left unattended, that can suffer from heat stress or scorching, if there is not a thermostat shut off.

It's that time of year, when you don't have enough rags or old towels, or like me you've lost your hair dryer for the sake of drying off # 466.