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Deterring Dystocia

There are many reasons fall calving is a part of my personal operation. Calving fleshy cows on native grass, generally favorable weather, better use of bull power with two calving seasons, different marketing opportunities, etc... all make their way to the top of the list. One anecdotal observation that I've noted and hear repeated by other fall calving managers, is shorter gestation periods which can translate into less dystocia. Dystocia is a major profit robber as it relates to dead or "slow" calves and has negative effects on rebreeding the female. Issues with the birthing process cannot be completely avoided, but there are preventative measures to consider.

The fourth Beef Cow/Calf study conducted by the National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) in 2017 estimated 9% of heifers and 4% of cows need some assistance during calving each year. The final days or hours leading up to calving is often too late in the process to prevent dystocia from occurring, but looking back on management decisions from the past breeding season and gestation period may provide some insight into how calving will go.

Selecting heifers that have a better chance of calving unassisted is a perfect starting point. If the heifer was big and needed assistance when she was born, is an indicator that she too could have dystocia issues. Measuring pelvic area in replacement heifers before their first breeding or calving will give producers an idea of which females may have trouble due to abnormal pelvis shape or size. Not every heifer is destined to be a momma cow and feeder heifers have good value now, don't be afraid to cull. Make replacement selections based upon genetics and performance carefully!

Expected Progeny Difference (EPD) values can help point decisions towards heifer retention and bull selection, particularly the Calving Ease Direct (CED) EPD. Utilize calving ease bulls when mating to heifers or young/small cows that may have trouble calving. CED measures percent of unassisted births and considers the size and presentation of the fetus. Be careful not to over select for CED in mature cows, as pounds of weaned calf and potential revenue can be given up unintentionally. CED is a better indicator to prevent dystocia compared to birth weight EPD or actual birthweight numbers.

Body condition score going into calving is an important factor to monitor. Pay attention to heifers and cows that are carrying excessive amounts of fat or are very thin. Over-conditioned females are more likely to have calving troubles due to accumulation of fat in the pelvis, incumbering fetal passage through the birth canal. Those females who are too thin likely will have reduced endurance during calving due to lack of energy stores. Separate cows based on condition so not to overfeed fat cows and underfeed thin ones.

Physical condition may be an overlooked factor and can be another beneficial difference with fall calving cows. Cows need to be in good physical shape at calving season and cows who've been out grazing generally get more exercise. If cows have been in a dry lot or small pasture during gestation, less energy will be used every day, due to inactivity and they can become "out of shape". Finally, avoid hauling cows close to calving, as fetal growth is occurring very rapidly and calf position can flip if cows slip or fall. Injuries to the cow can also occur through this movement and activity.

We may be at a point in year where some of things cannot be addressed for this calving season, but there is always next year to plan for. Nothing can completely prevent dystocia and careful observation needs to be given to the cowherd at calving time, but hopefully incidences of dystocia can be lowered following some of the above management practices. Good luck with fall calving!