Cattle Chat: Caring for the heifers at calving

K-State cattle experts share tips for success during calving season

By Lisa Moser, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — When starting a family, first-time mothers tend to experience longer labors than those who’ve given birth before. In much the same way, heifers need to be managed differently than cows at calving time, said the experts at the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute speaking on a recent Cattle Chat podcast.

“Heifers have to be monitored more closely at calving than cows do,” said Bob Larson, veterinarian.

He explained that heifers are typically only 80% of their full skeletal size when they have their first calf.

“Because heifers haven’t reached their full skeletal size, there just isn’t as much room in the pelvis for the calf to come through during the birth process,” Larson said.

Nutrition plays a key role in helping the heifers grow to their full mature size and in assuring that the developing calf gets what it needs to thrive, said the experts.

“Ideally the heifers and cows need to be calving at a body condition score of six,” Larson said.

And with heifers, the ration needs to be closely evaluated to make sure that they are getting the energy and protein requirements needed to grow their bodies, said Phillip Lancaster, beef cattle nutritionist.

“Regardless of whether it is a cow or a heifer, it is important that her nutritional needs are being met to avoid negative long-term impacts for her or her calf,” Lancaster said.

Larson agreed and added that females in a negative energy balance can experience uterine inertia.
“Uterine inertia is when the smooth muscle in the uterus is not able to really contract to push that calf out, so if cows are depleted of their energy reserves the muscles become fatigued faster,” Larson said.

When it comes to calving, heifers tend to experience a longer first stage of labor -- which involves contractions that push the calf into the birth canal – compared to cows, said Larson.

“How ever, once the water breaks, heifers and cows should be making noticeable progress every 15 minutes. If that isn’t happening, the producer or veterinarian needs to assess the situation and be ready to assist if needed,” Larson said.

To hear the full discussion, listen to the Cattle Chat podcast online or through your preferred streaming platform.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story BCI Cattle Chat podcast, https://ksubci.org/2023/03/31/listener-question-brians-trip-research-round-up/

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