News Release
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2019 Calving Season Challenges

Last week I attended the Beef Cattle and Forage Field Day that was held at the Southeast Research and Extension Center in Parsons. Dr. Greg Hanzlicek, with the Kansas State Veterinary Diagnostic Lab, was one of the speakers. His talk was on "why did we have weak and stillborn calves this year."

Dr. Hanzlicek started the discussion comparing 2019 to recent years and looked at issues with death loss. He commented that in 2019 we didn't have abnormal numbers of cattle abortions unlike some years in which we can have abortion storms. However, this spring, there was a huge increase in weak and stillborn calves. Calves born were often too weak to stand or get up to nurse, or they become very weak within the first week of life. There were also abundant reports of stillbirths.

The Kansas State Veterinary Diagnostic Lab came up with several possible causes and then looked into each case. The possible causes listed were: dystocia (calving difficulty); BVD (bovine viral diarrhea); nitrate toxicity; or nutritional problems like deficiencies of protein/energy; vitamin A; trace minerals; selenium or vitamin E.

The findings found an isolated herd where BVD was the problem and another case where nitrogen toxicity was the concern, but the majority of the problems were tied to cow nutrition. The herds were either deficient in energy/protein or they had a Vitamin A deficiency.

Vitamin A in a cow's diet comes from grazing green forage, when the grass goes dormant there is very little Vitamin A left in the plant. However, the cow can store vitamin A in her liver for two to four months. If you are grazing native grass, that grass goes dormant in mid-October and doesn't green up until April. Thus cattle should be supplemented with vitamin A during winter and early spring.

What about my hay, I bale it green? Research shows during storage vitamin A decreases about 6-7% a month. If you feed six month old hay, it has already lost 42% of the vitamin A that was present at harvest, and if you feed year old hay you have lost 84%.

Dr. Hanzlicek stated, "Another problem with vitamin A is it oxidizes very quickly in mineral mixes, so don't buy mineral in large quantities to carry over year to year. Buy what you plan to feed during the winter." He suggests, looking for mineral that contains 325,000 international units of vitamin A for winter feeding.

The other issues causing the weak calves/stillborns were related to protein or energy. Cold temperature and mud both increase the cow's need for energy. If the cow has a wet hair coat and its cold, her energy needs go up exponentially. What the Diagnostic Lab found was in terms of feeding, producers were doing what they had been doing for years. Those producers had gotten along fine up until this year, but this year wasn't like the past several years it was colder, wetter, and muddy all through the winter. Cow's energy needs just weren't being met.

Protein was also a concern. One of the private feed labs in Kansas sent the Diagnostic Lab the results of all their brome hay samples (700+). This year, if you used the book values for crude protein of the brome hay when making your cattle rations you were shorting your cattle of protein. The protein values from the lab showed this year's brome hay crop having a 2% lower crude protein level than the book value. Add to that, the fiber content was much higher. Therefore, the hay didn't supply enough protein for the diet and the fiber slowed the digestion of the hay down so the cows couldn't eat enough to meet their nutritional needs.

Dr. Hanzlicek commented, "if you had problems this spring at calving, watch those calves as they may have an increased incidence of scours, more eye problems than normal, and elevated issues with summer pneumonia." These problems are primarily due to lack of, or poor colostrum from those cows deficient in protein or energy.

In summary, Dr. Hanzlicek said, "periodically consult your cows." Look at their manure, is it piling up? If so you may need to feed more protein. Look at the cow's body condition and try to keep your cows at a body condition score of five or better. Provide a quality mineral and monitor its intake. Do not store mineral for long periods of time. And lastly, he suggested testing your feed stuffs, then balance your ration to meet your cow's needs.