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BeefTalk: The Goal is 97 Percent Live Calves



Try for a less than 3 percent calf death loss.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Calving season is the current main activity for many ranchers, and calving season is the time when most calves die.

Low calf death loss is the measurement of calving success. So what would one expect?

The historical North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association calving data summarized through the CHAPS (Cow Herd Appraisal Performance System) program sponsored by the NDSU Extension Service indicate that 3.7 percent of the calves born do not make weaning.

Conversely, setting a goal of 97 percent live calves

Images

Calf Death Loss

Typical 3.7%	What was your calf death loss?
	What are you going to do to improve?

Calf Death Loss - What was your calf death loss and what are you going to do to improve?

nd state fair



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at weaning would be a realistic anticipated outcome.

Further CHAPS data review shows 10 years ago, the benchmark was 3.4 percent, and five years ago, the benchmark was 3.6 percent. The most recently calculated 20-year average was 3.7 percent, with the lowest calf death loss at 3 percent and the greatest calf death loss at 5.8 percent. Thus, a 97 percent live calf crop in the fall remains achievable.

Remembering that most calf death loss occurs prior to 2 weeks of age, the calving book certainly is needed. The calving book is a written record and should contain a notation as to what the best thought was of when and why a calf died.

The death loss number should be calculated daily, or as regularly as possible, to keep an eye out for encroaching health problems. The calculation is simple: Divide the total number of dead calves by the number of calves born.

For smaller herds, or at the beginning of the calving season, the number may be high. Let's say of the first 10 calves born, two died. Well, the death loss is 20 percent. But we hope the number will reduce quickly to below 3 percent as more cows calve.

Why 3 percent death loss, or the reverse, 97 percent live calves? Well, not every calf will survive, and some deaths are not preventable. So,

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for peace of mind and peace within the calving crew, some death loss needs to be expected.

Disappointment is understandable, but another cow is calving as one reviews the current loss, so stick with the living. But if the death loss seems to be increasing and it is not below the 3 percent level, then the time is right for intervention and inclusion of the local veterinarian.

While the first death may warrant a visit to the veterinarian, what a producer is looking for is the containment of health issues that may be management-related and fixable. Do not wait; consult your local veterinarian. Try hard for a less than 3 percent calf death loss. Mother Nature may or may not help.

One is reminded that calf death loss has lots of feelings. In fact, if one does not quiver a little bit at the death of a calf, then one is in the wrong business. In all that cattle ranchers do, the joy of success is paramount and a driving force. This is, in fact, true for any person who experiences caring for newborn animals.

I remember many days of calving, lambing, farrowing and hatching, and at the day's end, the sigh of relief that life has begun. Sometimes in our excitement, we may miss or simply set aside our disappointments.

As a herdsman and his son were going through the day's newborns, those that did not make it

where thrown over the fence for later disposal.
The immediate attention was on the survival side.

Although the herdsman did not notice immediately, he eventually realized that his son was not at his side. The herdsman retraced his steps, finding his son kneeling beside the dead calf, crying and obviously distraught over the death. The herdsman took some needed time to explain the situation: the fact that along with life, death co-exists.

We do our best, and yet some do not survive. Those who have grown up in the life-giving barns of cold, spring days understand the give and take of life and death. For those who never have been there, well, let's just say, you can tell.

There are no assurances. Even if every potential outcome is planned, there still will be a dead calf at the end of some day.

For those who visited the recently farrowed sow, those newborn pigs that did not survive are removed; for those who lifted the cluck hen from the newly hatched, some remained in the egg; for those who beat the sun up and rushed to the barn for the morning lamb count, one was laying still in the straw; and for those who checked the cows on a cold winter night, the unseen bump on the path turns out to be a cold, stiff calf.

All right, enough of reality! We do what we can.
And believe it or not, mother and newborn seem to

know well what to do.

Management may be positive, but it also may be negative, so learn to tell the difference and adjust accordingly. Know your benchmark and achieve it.

The point here is not that we stop life and death but rather how we, as producers, appreciate the living, with a caring attitude that comforts the crying son and engages tomorrow with more optimism.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; (701) 456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

NDSU Agriculture Communication - April 7, 2016

source:	Kris Ringwall, (701) 456-1103, ✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu
editor:	Ellen Crawford, (701) 231-5391, ✉ellen.crawford@ndsu.edu

Attachments



[PDF - Calf Death Loss - What was your calf death loss and what are you going to do to improve?](#)

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387.40 Kb)



[EPS - Calf Death Loss - What was your calf death loss and what are you going to do to improve?](#)

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