



BeefTalk 658: Where Are the Elders?

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



In the past, the cow-calf business was a family business, so the family did the work.

Deal with the living and care for the dying. If one is in the business of caring for living things, then one always should approach the day with the understanding that the goal is life, not death. Death is inevitable for all, but not our daily goal. As we care for the numerous living things around us, our goal is life.

In the world of beef production, all management directives are designed to maintain and improve the herd. Each cow, bull and calf is essential. Calving time serves to illustrate the strong desire and need to focus on each cow and calf.



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Calf death is unacceptable. We know that calf death will occur. However, that does not mean we accept the death of a calf. Instead, we see it as a challenge to our management abilities. The recent cold spells and spring snows are a challenge for those who chose to have their cows calve early or, for all practical purposes, at the traditional calving time.

The family is rewarded well for bringing into the home or even the bathtub a chilled calf that needs warmth. Larger calving operations also are rewarded well for placing a calf in a warmer in the shop.

The essence of cattle production radiates from calving. Calving is that time when care is critical and understanding important. Perhaps that is when one really comes to appreciate the “look.” Although it may not seem like much, some people have the uncanny ability to look at another living thing and perceive all that is good and all that is bad.

Calving certainly is a time for the “look.” Is that cow really having problems? Has that newborn suckled? Is that calf running a fever? Does that calf look a bit emaciated?

The same is true any time cattle are handled, such as the new calves in the feedlot or the new replacement heifers that just arrived. All cattle benefit greatly when they have someone watching over them who has the ability to provide the look.

The look is not learned from a book and is not something you can just tell someone. The look is engrained in the depths of someone's ability to understand and process detail. The little things in life, such as the twitch of an ear, blink of an eye or failure to blink, will mean something to those who understand how to care for living things.

Therefore, one of the lessons of life is to deal with the living and care for the dying. The chilled calf that is not taken care of does not have a future. Taking the time to gather the calf, provide some stimulation and encouragement and to reunite the calf with an impatient mother is critical, if not essential, to the cow-calf operation.

Surrounding the herd during calving with those who take the time to do the look is critical to the survival of the cow-calf business. There is not an option to come back later or let the next shift worry about problems. The last looks before leaving or one more check of the gate latch are more opportunities to visually see that the calf is nursing.

Such activities are what produce cattle hands who know what is important and that keeping calves in the living inventory is the goal. Unfortunately, there is a greater challenge in the world of beef. It is a challenge that really changes how the beef industry functions, is perceived and the industry eventually will evolve.

Who is going to do the work? That is the challenge. In the past, the cow-calf business was a family business, so the family did the work. There was a learning curve, but the younger members of the family watched mom, dad, grandma and grandpa slowly, but methodically, do the day's chores without missing a beat.

A problem cow or calf would be checked and rechecked. Sometimes the checks happened so fast that one did not know they were taking place, but the older family members still had the ability or look to know what and when things needed to be done.

Have you ever experienced a day when everyone started to show up all of a sudden because they just knew they were needed? The help always was appreciated and the right timing was there. It was almost eerie because they knew when the time was right.

Today, that still may be true for many operations. However, in reality, many operations are managed outside the family, so the elders are not there. The difference is subtle but real.

May you find all your ear tags.

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