



BeefTalk 660: If Baby Rabbits Can Survive Snow, So Can Calves

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Producer Goal Number ONE



Establishing good calf vigor means having to worry less about how to report dead calves.

After the last blast of snow, the snowbanks were starting to thaw when I noticed a small baby rabbit. The rabbit, fresh from the nest, was nibbling on the available grass and doing fine.

While watching the baby rabbit, I was involved with a phone interview asking me how many baby calves had perished in the same snow storm that this little cottontail rabbit had survived.

The contrast was stark, but there was a beautiful point. Life survives. In the world of beef production, baby calves need to survive inclement weather with minimal intervention. The desire to survive, seek that first drink and dry place to bed down, and to bond quickly with mother are desires that come from genes that kick in at birth.



Full Color Graphic
[\[click here\]](#)



Grayscale Graphic
[\[click here\]](#)



Adobe PDF
[\[click here\]](#)

Like the baby cottontail, calves will survive. That is not to say, depending on the management and type of beef operation, that adequate protection and assistance is not required. Beef producers must provide the labor and facilities to meet the demands of the production scenario they have chosen.

Regardless of the beef system, the point is that calves should have genes engrained that stress a strong desire to survive. Those calves will work with the producer to make life easier. Those long hours of trying to get a limp, non-caring calf to nurse are very frustrating, especially knowing that one has gone to extremes to help.

Having brought in the cow and calf to comfortable quarters only to have the calf lie down and do nothing is frustrating. Trying to get a calf to want to nurse by trying every trick in the book also is frustrating. Any situation that involves calves that lack vigor or desire will add to the stress of calving. What's the solution?

The first thing not to do is blame the weather. The producer evaluates the weather and the probability of bad weather events while planning the cow-calf operation.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center spent many hours evaluating the switch to May calving. The cattle have nothing to do with the fact that today, early in the fourth week of April, snow is falling in southwestern North Dakota. The cows are scheduled to start moving at the end of the week and into the first week of May to calving pastures that still are covered with snow.

The infamous third leaf on the local cool-season grasses may be hard to find and the total mass of grass sufficient to sustain cattle growth is not available. A few extra days of feeding will suffice.

However, spring is coming, even with delays in pasture turnout. Those initial rays of sunshine will transform the cold, barren lands quickly. Like popping popcorn, there is more to come. Pasture grass, just like the baby rabbit or newborn calf, is very resilient if managed properly.

Having some carryover grass certainly is beneficial and, to the astute manager, critical to success as the various weather conditions stretch from one extreme to the other. None of us can turn back the clock and reschedule the weather, so the cattle need to fit the environment. That fit is called genetics.

The reporter was asking about calf death losses. If the answer is high calf losses, then re-evaluate the genetic package that is being used in the operation because calves are supposed to live. Unfortunately, producers can become so engrained in what they do that they fail to realize that life and beef cattle production may not need to be as difficult as they have made it.

If the genetics are wrong, change them. If management and labor no longer can keep up with the environment, then change.

Watch the calves. Are they bouncy or dragging? Are they exploring or sleeping? Are they reasonably aggressive or withdrawn? Evaluating those first few days of life will tell a producer what to expect from those calves for the rest of their lives. Heifers that breed well, steers that move right up to the feed bunk, bulls that settle lots of cows and older cows that never quit are long-term positives of having good, vigorous calves.

Establishing good calf vigor means having to worry less about how to report dead calves. If that little bunny can survive all this bad weather, it's not asking too much of the calf to do the same.

Don't ask; just go ahead and design and breed cattle that want to live and take on the challenges of life.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

Copyright (c) 2010 BeefTalk.com. All rights reserved.