

News Column
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SANDHILLS CALVING SYSTEM

As a kid growing up, helping my dad during calving season, I dreamed of fancy facilities that would make our lives easier. A nice calving barn surrounded by pipe fences, where we could keep the cows up close seemed attractive to my young mind.

It wasn't meant to be though. Instead, all we had was a small, but strong pen that we could use to sort cattle,...if it was dry, and if we could ever get them driven into the pen. That is also where we delivered calves when a cow or heifer needed assistance.

There was a row of trees to the south and west of our catch pen that kept it muddy during the cool months. And it was a dead end, located where the cattle couldn't walk by it daily, so it was always a struggle getting cattle into the pen.

We didn't have the money to construct better facilities anyway, but when I mentioned my desire for a fancy calving pen to my dad he was quick to point out that we were much better off calving out on pasture anyway. He was adamant about not calving in a dry lot.

Now that I'm a bit older, I understand his concerns. Not only did our dry lot get wet and turn into a mud lot, it would have also been a great environment for harboring pathogens that cause calf scours (diarrhea). By calving on pasture, we rarely had scour problems.

Cattle producers who are experiencing calf scour problems need to consider the Sandhills Calving System. While most smaller producers won't be able to fully employ the system the way it is used in the Sandhills of Nebraska, the concept is sound and some of the principles can be

applied.

In the Sandhills Calving System, cows calve in a network of pastures arranged so cows can be moved almost weekly. Instead of calving everything in one pasture and moving cow-calf pairs to clean ground, pregnant cows are moved, leaving the pairs behind.

Cows are turned in to the first pasture once the first calf is born and they all remain there for two weeks. After two weeks, cows with calves are left in the first pasture and pregnant cows are moved to a new pasture. Thereafter, pregnant cows are moved to clean pasture weekly.

The reason the Sandhills system works is because cows aren't calving in a pasture where there have been weeks, or months, for scour causing pathogens to multiply. The newborns are the most susceptible to scour problems, so they are the calves that need the clean environment.

Moving cows weekly probably won't work for most producers. A week appears to be the gold standard, recommended by the veterinarians who designed the system, but others suggest moving pregnant cows every week to 10 days. Yet another recommendation is to move pregnant cows at the first sign of scours in the pasture currently serving as the calving pasture.

Ranchers who have employed the Sandhills system report that cows get used to being moved regularly, and cows without calves move willingly out of the pasture, leaving cows with calves behind.

Calving on pasture may not work for everyone, but if you are losing more calves to scours than you are to calving difficulty, it might be time to make a change. Maybe only the heifers need to be kept up close and the mature cows can be out in pastures where they only get checked once a day.

I admit that it was a big headache catching a heifer that needed assistance when she was in a 100 acre pasture on the McClure farm. However, when I hear about other producers

problems with calf scours, I appreciate the system we had on the McClure farm.

Being too poor to build good pens was probably a good thing. If we had them, we probably would have used them more than we should.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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