



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Reproduction Section

450

Designing a Cattle Obstetric Stall

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Every ranch needs to design a functional calving assistance area to increase profits by decreasing calf death losses, animal injuries, and increase subsequent conception rates. Proper and timely assisted births can increase cow and calf vitality, which in turn positively affects growth and reproduction resulting in higher dollar returns to the ranch. As with any other job it is much less difficult to assist in the delivery of a calf if proper equipment and facilities are available.

Proper facilities can affect the motivation to bring the cow or heifer in the barn and allow assisting birth without undue stress on the animal or the producer. The animal should move to the area easily, be constrained without fright, and then helped with the birthing process. With inadequate facilities the cattle producer often delays assistance and has difficulty in corralling and restraining the animal. Frequently, this results in problems with the "mothering up" or bonding process after birth is completed. A calm, unhurried manner promotes successful results.

The facilities should be designed for easy animal movement and located in an area familiar to the heifers. The OB stall can be outside although inside a barn is often a more pleasant environment on a cold snowy night. Feeding heifers in the general area will allow them to be familiar with the surroundings and move into the area with ease.

A concrete pad is helpful. After several births, the area tends to become muddy and slick. A pad of rough concrete provides sure footing, as well as a drier, cleaner environment. The pad can be swept clean or a floor drain provided to remove liquid and placenta. A floodlight above and behind the animal is also helpful. The obvious benefit is to be able to see what is needed. A light may not heat an area, however, it does "feel" warmer than working in the dark.

Hinged, swing away, or interchangeable panels (gates) allow flexibility in design and aid in cattle movement. These are attached on either side of the head catch to (1) facilitate moving the heifer into the catch and (2) aid in holding the heifer quiet as assistance is given. Once assistance is started the gates need to swing away from the animal so that it might lay down in the birth process. These panels can form a small pen to hold heifer and calf after birth.

The natural actions of cattle after an unassisted birth is to stand, pivot 180°, and begin to mother (lick, etc.) the calf. This action not only dries the calf but stimulates it to move, breath, and get up and bond with the mother. To simulate this action the heifer should be allowed to back out of the head catch and pivot with her head down. All she can smell at this point is the calf. Bonding (mothering) will generally occur quickly. If an animal is moved to a new location before bonding has taken place, this process is much slower. The design of the facilities should allow the heifer to mimic this natural instinct.

Head Catch

Several commercially available head gates are acceptable for a calving stall. It is essential they open all the way to the floor and have straight side bars that constrain the head. These design peculiarities allow the heifer to lay down during the process without the danger of "choking down." A curved head catch gate can be modified by welding a straight pipe into the curved section. A wooden head catch may be less expensive (Fig. 1) but should open to the floor.

The gate can be equipped with a rope to lock the head from the rear or side of the animal when desired. The area beyond the head gate should be open and lighted so the animal will readily enter. A dark hole will discourage