



# Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section

785

## Management of Neonatal Beef Calves

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Calf losses at birth and during the first few weeks of life are often caused by diseases, death, and poor growth performance. Calf losses remain a major problem in many beef cow/calf herds. Field observations suggest that good herd management may help prevent these calf losses. An Idaho Total Beef Program field research and demonstration project, conducted in a five-county area in southeastern Idaho, identified clinical and management practices during and after birth that may be directly or indirectly important in determining the survival and growth performance of neonatal calves.

This publication summarizes findings and recommendations based on observations made of the calves during the field research and demonstration project.

### Birth Date, Breed, Sex, and Identification

A complete beef cow/calf herd record system must include information about birth date, breed, sex, and ear tag numbers identifying all calves. This information is important because it provides part of the basis for making short- and long-term health, breeding, and feeding management decisions for the herd.

### Weighing Calves

Body weights should be recorded for all calves at birth, at 1 month of age, and at weaning. Hanging scales, suitable for use on young calves, are commercially available. These scales should be placed conveniently near the calving area and should be calibrated to assure

accuracy. The information gained from weighing calves is important because it provides a direct measure of the success of the feeding and breeding programs for these animals. In addition, obtaining weight data helps to identify calves that are unthrifty and that require special attention because they suffer from the effects of poor nutrition or disease.

### Body Temperature

Producers should measure and record the rectal temperatures of all calves at birth. They should also record the rectal temperature of a representative number of calves once a day for the first 3 days of life. Mercury or electronic digital thermometers are commercially available and are rapid and convenient to use. Rectal temperatures of normal beef calves range between 99.8°F and 102.5°F. Neither breed nor sex of calves nor age of the respective dams has a significant effect on the normal rectal temperatures of calves.

Elevated rectal temperatures (103°F or greater) are routinely observed in calves that are sick because of infection caused by disease-producing organisms. Elevated rectal temperatures often give producers the earliest sign that a problem exists, before other clinical signs of disease become apparent. Measuring rectal temperatures of calves allows early detection and treatment of diseases. Early detection and treatment of illness in calves will assure a prompt response and recovery from most diseases.

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