

Mimic Mother Nature

Calving barn should meet basic needs.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

The best place to calve your cows may be on green grass in the warm sun, but that may not always be an option. Your bull-marketing plan, large numbers of calving heifers, or even working around a crop production schedule may force some inclement winter-weather calving. To make the most of the decision to calve indoors, set up your barn to meet basic needs.

“Calving barns must have no drafts but good ventilation to mimic the outdoors. Ridge vents with upward air flow can help you avoid respiratory issues,” says Michigan State University Beef Extension Specialist Dan Buskirk. “Also to mimic the outdoors, you need clean, non-crowded areas and nonporous surfaces that clean easily. Cows don’t calve in the same spot outdoors.”

Travis Meterer, University of Illinois Extension beef educator at the Orr Research Center, also is a fan of spring calving on grass, but understands some producers need to calve earlier.

“A calving barn can be handy any time of the year. Calving trouble can occur in any cow, and sometimes they need assistance,” he says. “Recognize that dystocia is more common in heifers and in excessively thin or excessively fat cows than cows in correct body condition score.”

Calving barn must-haves

A top priority in any calving barn is to maintain cleanliness and prevent illness. Straw can be used for bedding to keep calving areas dry and disease-free. By removing wet spots each day and adding new straw, the barn also may be warmer during the winter. Even though spot cleaning is important, so also is completely cleaning the barn and rebedding pens frequently.

“Flow of a calving barn is important. You want a cow to calve and get the calf started, and then you can get the pair out of the barn and into a postcalving area,” says Meterer. “Consider using the Sandhills method of

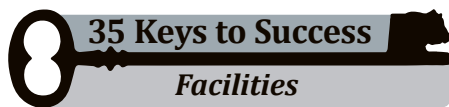
rotating pens postcalving to limit scours and disease transmission.”

Buskirk recommends good cattle flow as well, so pairs do not cross paths. To meet biosecurity needs, he advises using a U-shaped or linear path extending from accessible pens.

When it comes to maternity pen size, 10 feet (ft.) by 10 ft. is adequate, says Meterer. “An alley system should make all pens accessible, including a calving assistance area. That allows you to get a cow needing help to and from the calving assistance area. Allow enough room to use equipment like a calf jack and to access the cow’s udder to help calves get started nursing.”

Kurt Kangas, American Angus Association regional manager for Alaska, Montana and Wyoming, previously worked for a ranch where they could calve 70-80 cows in a 24-hour period. Their calf-pulling room was heated for both calf and human comfort. He says a low ceiling in a well-insulated building was critical to keep heat in.

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Tips from the University of Illinois



PHOTOS BY TRAVIS METEER

▲ The University of Illinois calving facility provides plenty of room, good light and a clipboard to take and hold notes if multiple people check cows. The notes may include such information as when the calf nursed or had shots. A checklist before the pair leaves the barn can include birth weights, tattoos and medications given. The facility does not have permanent water structures in the pens because the cows are in and out, although water can be taken to the cows as needed.



▲ The headcatch has swing-away gates that can be locked into place in numerous locations. The gate directly behind the pen swings and works as a crowd gate to get the cow in the headgate. Once a cow is secure in the headgate and the swing sides are positioned and locked, the crowd gate swings back away for full access to the cow’s backside. This allows plenty of room for a calf jack or other birth assistance. A grooved concrete floor provides traction and easy cleaning.

well lit. Buskirk says Michigan State recently updated lighting in their facilities to extensive LED lighting. While he says the lighting is a tremendous improvement, skylights and spot lighting may be enough in some barns.

Oregon State University published a calving school handbook that may provide some direction. The handbook at beefcattle.ans.oregonstate.edu/html/publications/CSHandbook.htm includes a simple design for a headcatch and floor using gates and easy ways to move animals. The booklet describes how to make a simple calving assistance area with minimal expense.

“A concrete pad or well-drained floor is important for the headcatch area, so it won’t become muddy or slippery and can be cleaned. ... Rough concrete gives traction and can be swept or hosed if a floor drain is installed, or a sandy floor with straw can provide cleanliness and cushion.”

Oregon State notes hinged, swing-away gates can be mounted on each side of the headcatch to create a chute to hold the cow as she is checked or requires birthing assistance. The gates can be swung away so the cow can lie down. Authors recommend the headcatch be designed with straight sides opening all the way to the floor so the animal can lie down.

Calving barn nice-to-haves

While there are many must-haves in a calving barn, there is a short list of nice-to-haves, as well.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Buskirk says gates that allow producers to get a calf out of the pen for processing in safety is good, along with a setup that allows producers to monitor cows without being seen.

“A heated area where you can sit and monitor progress in the barn is a plus, or consider installing video cameras you can monitor from inside the house,” he says.

Adequate storage for feed and bedding is convenient, along with storage for dystocia equipment, pulling chains and

pharmaceuticals. Running water and a hot box for calves are other options.

“Use what works for you, whether that is an equipment shed, horse or dairy barn. There is no silver bullet to equip your barn,” says Kangas. “Know your limits and when to call for help.”



Editor’s Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.



▲ In this rear view of the headcatch, the crowd gate is closed. Swing side gates are used to crowd the cow into going into the self-catch headgate. Swing-away sides are necessary in a calving chute. If a cow goes down, she will not get stuck in the chute. The rebar rod on the floor allows the sides to secure while the crowd gate is swung open and out of the way.



▲ Here is a look at the University of Illinois facility’s side access to the cow’s udder. Sliding components allow safe access to the underbelly of the cow to assist with nursing. The cow cannot swing around when in this position.



▲ Another look at the side access feature also shows the floor drain for easier cleaning.