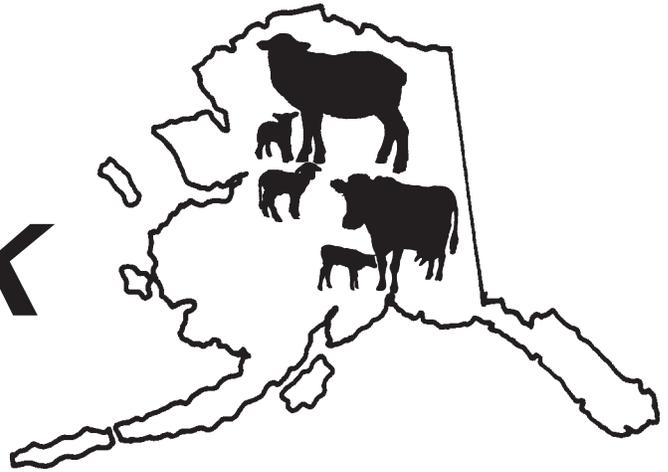


ALASKA LIVESTOCK SERIES



Farm Animal Obstetrics

LPM-00440

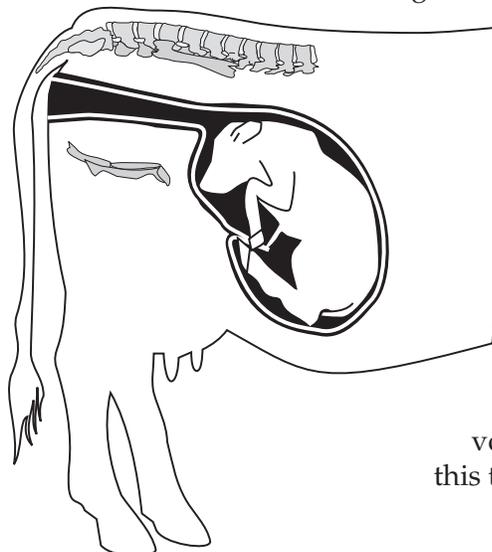
The birthing process is a critical time to be alert and pay attention to your animals since the survival or loss of offspring makes the difference between a successful or an unsuccessful livestock enterprise. This statement is true whether we are talking about a 300 cow beef-breeding herd, a 25 doe milking goat tripp, or a small farm flock of a few ewes.

Some key points to a successful birthing season are vigilant observation, adequate facilities, and attention to detail. Observation of your animals also involves knowing what signs to look for as an indication of impending birth and deciding when the time has come that your animal needs your assistance. Adequate facilities means that you have provided close-up animals with a clean, dry area to give birth and that you have the ability to restrain the animal with minimum stress to the animal if your assistance is needed during the birth process. Attention to detail means that you have provided adequate bedding for the animal and that you have the tools necessary to assist with birth of the offspring as well as everything available to provide care to the neonate. Extra effort during this time of year will pay great dividends in the form of calves, kids or lambs that provide critical income or provide replacements animals for your livestock enterprise.

How do you know when the animal needs help?

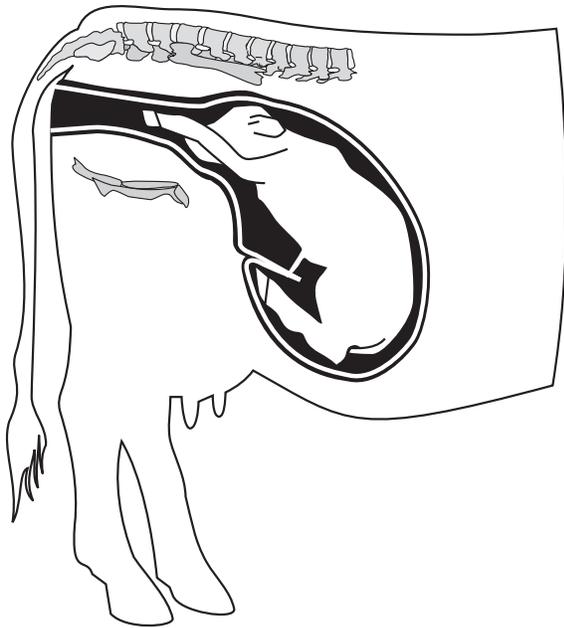
Knowing the signs of labor in farm animals will help with this decision. Each person must develop this skill by experience though, and many livestock producers have developed this skill through years of experience. There are some guidelines that can help determine the proper time to help your cow, doe or ewe give birth to their offspring.

The first stage of labor involves dilation of the cervix, softening of the pelvic ligaments and general preparation of the birth canal so that expulsion of the fetus may occur. This process takes 2 to 6 hours. During the first stage of labor the



cow, doe or ewe will be somewhat restless and uneasy. Does may be especially vocal during this time.

The second stage of labor begins when the fetal feet enter the vagina. Maternal abdominal straining, which is necessary to expel the fetus is stimulated at this time. The fetus is actually responsible for causing the mother to strain. The process of the fetus pressing on the mother's cervix causes a neural signal to travel to the mother's brain. This neural signal stimulates the release of a hormone called oxytocin from the pituitary, which is located at the base of the brain. This oxytocin travels through the bloodstream to the uterus and causes strong contractions resulting in the birth of the offspring. It should only take two to four hours from the time straining and contractions begin until the offspring is born.



If the first stage of labor lasts more than six hours, the fetus may not be positioned correctly. If the second stage of labor lasts more than two hours, the fetus may not be positioned correctly or it may just be too big for the mother to handle on her own. This later scenario is often true of first time mothers. Either of these situations means that the animal caretaker must examine the fetus further in order to ascertain what must be done to help the cow, doe or ewe.

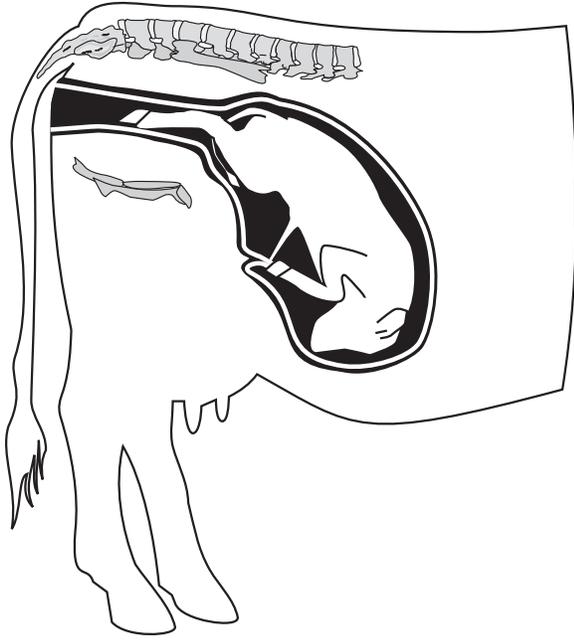
Examination:

Confine and restrain the cow, doe or ewe. Do this with as little stress as possible and, if possible, don't excite the animal. Scared animals release another hormone called adrenaline, a part of the flight or fright response. Adrenaline counteracts the hormone oxytocin and because of this, if you get the animal excited or scared; you will actually hinder instead of help the birthing process.

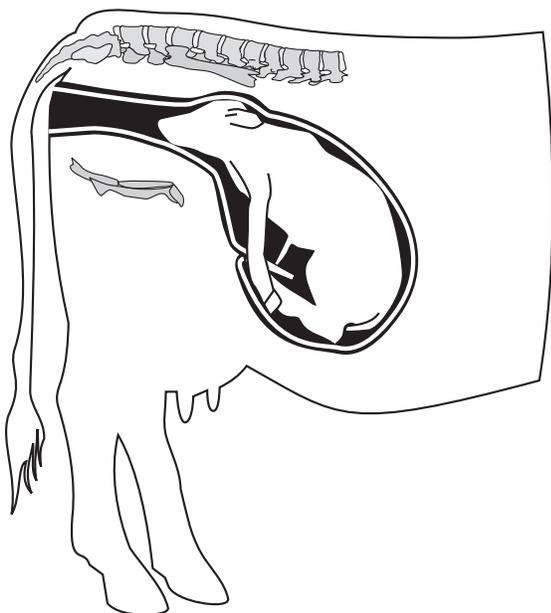
Once the animal is confined and restrained, think clean. Wash off the rectal-vaginal area with soap and warm water and thoroughly wash your hands and arms. I prefer to use an artificial insemination breeding glove, again washed with soap and warm water. Using an obstetrical lubricant, mild soap or shortening as a lubricant, enter the vagina. Keep your fingers close together so you won't puncture the reproductive tract. If no part of the fetus is in the vagina, identify the cervix and ascertain the degree of dilation. If any part of the fetus is in the vagina, identify what part you feel (head, feet, etc.) and ascertain the position of the fetus. At this point you may even be able to determine the relative size of the calf, kid or lamb.

Presentation:

Presentation refers to whether the fetus is coming forward or backward. These are both normal presentations. Backwards will be a little bit harder delivery just because the mother is not stimulated to release as much oxytocin and therefore her contractions may not be as coordinated as if the fetus was coming front feet and head first. If you just feel legs, it can be difficult to tell whether they are front legs or hind legs. One thing you can do to help yourself with this identification is to feel the joints on the fetus' legs while looking at the mother's front and hind legs.



A true breech position is one that presents other than two front legs and the head or two hind legs. If this is the case, the fetus must be pushed back into the uterus and repositioned into one of the normal presentations. This is much easier said than done and calls for the assistance of a veterinarian or someone very experienced in this process. The most important consideration in this case is that the uterus is not punctured.



A difficult birth may require the use of traction to assist the mother in expelling the offspring. The key word here is *assist*. Too often people feel they need to take over for the mother and remove the offspring by force. Instead, by using obstetrical chains properly attached to the legs, one may help the mother hold the ground she has gained with one contraction until she is able to push again with the next contraction. Be careful to stretch the lips of the vulva over the head of the offspring as it begins to exit the birth canal. By doing this slowly as helpful traction is applied, you will reduce the likelihood of tissue tears and reduce the amount of total traction that is necessary. Especially in ewes and does, check for another offspring after you have finished with the first birth.

Immediate Postpartum Care:

Watch the new mother to make sure that she is able to properly lick off the newborn. She is very exhausted right now, especially if it has been a difficult birth. It may be a good idea to have some towels available to help dry off and stimulate the calf, kid or lamb, especially if mom is too tired or if it is particularly cold at that time. Dip the navel of the newborn in iodine and make sure that it is up suckling and getting colostrum within 30 to 60 minutes. Keep both mother and newborn away from slick and wet areas.

If you are in the livestock business, you will see every type of birthing problem possible as time goes on. Learn from each problem and don't be afraid to ask the assistance of people with more experience, especially your veterinarian. Such assistance will increase your profitability and your success in your livestock enterprise.

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