Calves: Difficult Births and Deaths at Birth

Managing calves after difficult calvings

Calves that are at risk of being born dead or dying in the first 24 hr period after being pulled include:

-Any calf that requires farmer or vet assistance to be delivered.

- Large birth weight calves.

-Twins or triplets.

-From mothers that have a long labour.

-Immature/ premature calves.

-Calves coming back feet first.

-Traumatized during the birthing process i.e. broken legs, swollen face, broken ribs (21% of calves pulled with a jack can have broken ribs).

-Those calves that appear yellow at the time of birth.

A check list to follow for when pulling calves to try and reduce the number of deaths includes:

- Remove the membranes from the muzzle of the calf.

- Removed mucous and fluid from the mouth by using your fingers to scoop it out.

- Sit the calf up on its sternum (Traditionally after a calf has been born it was hung up by its back legs as it was thought this would help remove fluid from the calf's lungs. The great majority of the fluid that comes out of the mouth shortly after birth comes from the stomach and does not need to be removed. If a calf is hung up by its back legs the contents of the abdomen are pressing on the calf's diaphragm making it more difficult to breathe. Simply sit the calf up on its chest and rub the ribs with a towel or a handful of hay).

- The calf should take a breath within 30 seconds (You can stimulate the calf to breath by placing your finger or a piece of grass/ straw in the nose and rub the calf's head and chest with towels).

- Check for broken ribs or limbs

- The calf should 1) lift its head by itself within 5 minutes, 2) able to maintain the sitting position by itself within 15 minutes, and, 3) stand and suckle within 2 hrs.

- Check for congenital defects i.e. Umbilical hernia, mouth defects.

- Dip or spray the umbilical cord with iodine or chlorhexidine.

- Correctly id and record the calf and mother.

- Ensure adequate colostrum intake (3L within 2 hours after birth, repeat in 12 hours).