

Calving Management Practices on U.S. Beef Cow-calf Operations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) conducted the Beef 2007-08 study, which focused on beef cow-calf health and management practices in 24 States¹. These major beef cow-calf producing States represented 79.6 percent of U.S. operations with beef cows and 87.8 percent of U.S. beef cows.

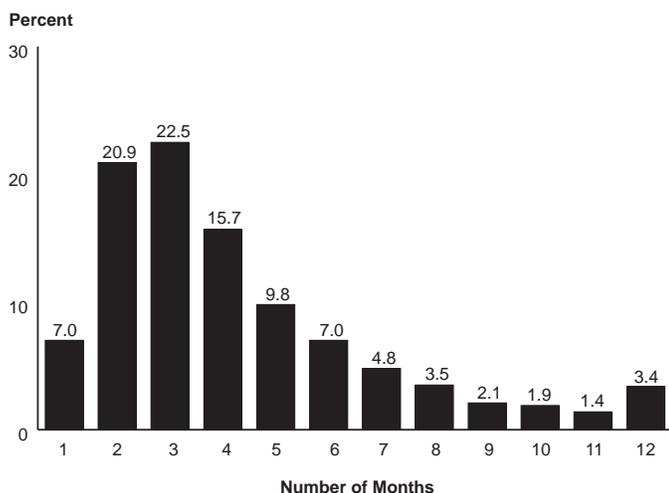
One of the goals of the Beef 2007-08 study was to take an in-depth look at calving practices on the Nation's beef cow-calf operations.

The calving season is a critical time for cow-calf operations. Producing live calves is essential to the operations' profitability. Yet, birth and the subsequent neonatal period are the most hazardous periods in a calf's life.

Calving season

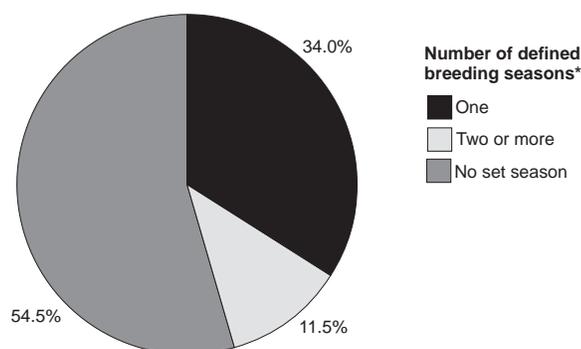
Having a defined and narrow calving season allows producers to target management assistance at appropriate times. About one-half of operations (50.4 percent) had one or more calves born alive during 3 or fewer months. Additionally, 15.7 percent of operations had calves born in 4 months of the year. Only 3.4 percent of operations had calves born in all 12 months of the year (figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of Operations by Number of Months in Which One or More Calves were Born Alive in 2007



To maintain a manageable calving season, operations should establish a defined breeding season. Over one-half of operations (54.5 percent) did not have a defined breeding season, while 34.0 percent of operations had one defined breeding season² (figure 2). Of operations that had one breeding season, 61.1 percent had a breeding season longer than 84 days.

Figure 2. Percentage of Operations by Number of Defined Breeding Seasons



*Defined breeding season was determined by removal of the bull from cows and/or heifers for at least 30 days.

Most frequently operations with one defined breeding season (43.4 percent) cited tradition as the reason for determining timing of the last calving season. Only 4.3 percent of these operations cited labor availability as the determining factor for timing the calving season, while 27.9 percent listed weather as the determining factor for timing the calving season.

Calving assistance

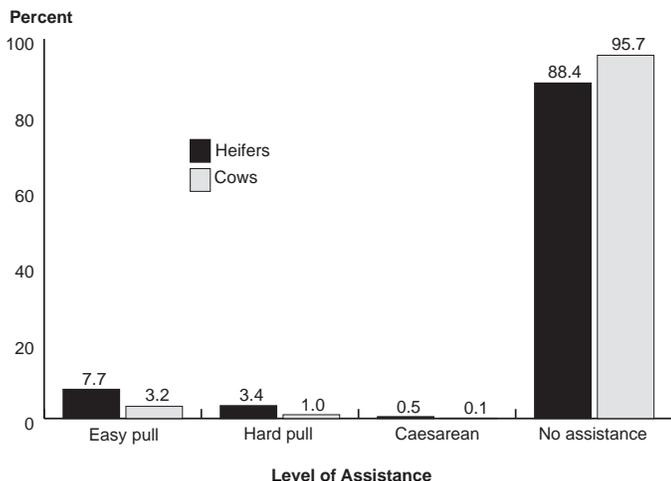
The majority of calves were born to heifers or cows that required no assistance during calving (88.4 and 95.7 percent, respectively). Most of the assistance provided to heifers and cows was considered an "easy pull" (7.7 and 3.2 percent, respectively) [figure 3].

¹States:

Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming.

²Producers removed the bull from the cow herd for at least 30 days during the year.

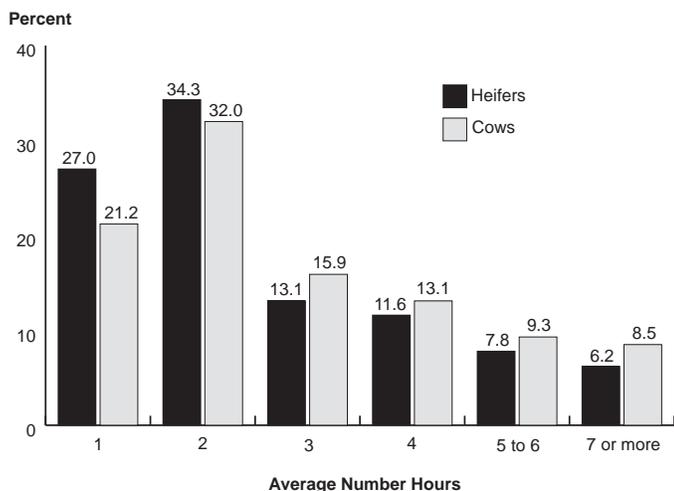
Figure 3. Percentage of Calves Born* to Heifers or Cows that Required the Following Assistance During Calving



*Born alive or dead from January to September, 2007.

Dystocia is a leading cause of neonatal death, and timely intervention can minimize or prevent calf losses. Most veterinarians recommend that cows and heifers be given assistance if they are in active labor for more than 2 hours. Almost 50 percent of operations allowed cows to labor 3 or more hours before assistance was given, and almost 40 percent of operations allowed heifers to labor an average of 3 or more hours (figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of Operations by Average Number of Hours Heifers and Cows Were Normally Allowed to Labor Before Assistance was Given



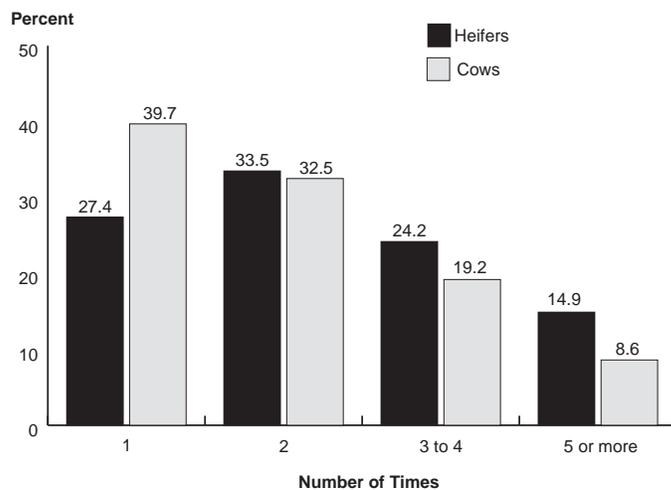
Calving observation

Producers should observe females on a regular basis during calving to identify those experiencing extended or difficult labor. Almost 9 of 10 operations (89.0 percent) regularly observed cows during calving, and more than 9 of 10 (92.7 percent) regularly observed heifers.

Of operations that regularly observed **heifers** during calving, 27.4 percent observed heifers only one time per

day, and 39.1 percent observed heifers three or more times per day. Of operations that regularly observed **cows** during calving, 39.7 percent observed cows one time per day, and 27.8 percent observed cows three or more times per day (figure 5).

Figure 5. For Operations in Which Heifers or Cows were Observed on a Regular Basis During Calving, Percentage of Operations by Number of Times Heifers were Observed During an Average 24-Hour Period



Adequate nutrition and a healthy environment are imperative to the health of newborn calves. Separating cow-calf pairs from pregnant cows can assist producers in observing new calves and decrease pathogen exposure of calves. However, only 14.0 percent of producers separated cow-calf pairs from pregnant cows. Operations with 200 or more beef cows were more likely to separate pairs after calving (45.8 percent) than operations with fewer cows.

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