

Life and Death on the Prairie

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The last two weeks were cold. Brutally cold. Coldest weather we've seen in over 30 years. Thankfully not the coldest ever. That record belongs to December 1989. But we went over 40 hours where it didn't get out of the negative digits of the thermometer. But while we were inconvenienced and at times uncomfortable, for most of us it does not even compare to what many fine men and women were dealing with out on the farms and ranches of this state.

This is the time of year that many cowherds are calving. Ewe flocks are lambing and nannies are kidding. Babies are being born all across the state. Just like humans, we don't know when those babies are going to be born. But when it's time, it's time. And for some crazy reason, it seems to be at night and often in the harshest conditions. While we look at those baby animals and think they are cute or adorable (and they often are), they are more than that to that farm or ranch. They will be raised and sold and that is the profit, or loss, for that livestock enterprise. Every baby that is born that doesn't survive, well, that's a year's worth of expense for keeping that mature cow, ewe or nanny alive and healthy that has no income to offset it. So those farmers and ranchers are going to do everything in their power to keep every single baby alive.

The time of birth and the first 24 to 48 hours afterwards are important, life or death important. While many times mama does just fine birthing her baby there are times that she needs assistance, especially if it's her first pregnancy. Those livestock producers are very adept at helping with a difficult birth. But once that calf hits the ground (figuratively speaking) it needs to get up, cleaned up and starting to nurse. Mama can usually do a pretty good job, but when it is bitterly cold, sometimes assistance is needed.

That baby animal, be it a calf, lamb or a kid, is born with a very ill equipped immune system. They have very few antibodies in their system when they are born. The first milk that any mammal mother produces is called colostrum. It is loaded with antibodies that the baby will absorb through its gut which then activates and supercharges its own immune system. But the gut of the young animal can only absorb these antibodies for the first day or two. After that, the lining of the gut changes and it can't absorb those antibodies anymore. The sooner that the young calf can start nursing on mama, the better off it will be.

But when you are a baby calf that weighs less than 100 pounds and you're wet because you were just born and it's 15 below zero plus whatever windchill is on top of that, you may very well struggle to stay warm, let alone stand up and nurse mama. Frostbite can set in fast on the ears, tails and sometimes even the nose. I've lost track of how many pictures I've seen in the past few days of calves, lambs and kids in the cab of a pickup truck, or in a kitchen or on the laundry room floor wrapped up in towels and blankets being fed some colostrum kept on hand just for that very reason.

These livestock producers, and often their entire families take turns making a check of the herd every hour or two around the clock. Daytime, night time, freezing weather or even the occasional blizzard. They are out there doing everything in their power to keep every single baby alive. In winters like this it becomes a life and death struggle out on the prairie in those calving pastures. And you'll find no better people in the world than those livestock producers who risk their own frost bite to help those babies!