

# IMPACT

 University of Idaho  
Cooperative  
Extension System

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## Cowboy Obstetrics - A Calving Primer

### *The Situation*

Dystocia or difficult births continues to plague cattle producers. Replacement heifers account for the majority of the difficult births, but older cows are not immune. Producers are buying low birth weight bulls and some are developing replacement heifers to achieve 85% of their mature weight before calving. These practices can help alleviate the problem - - but will not eliminate it.

The death of the calf at birth costs dollars that are easy to measure. Difficult births that delay the time to birth are “hidden” costs that we cannot see.

Difficult births produce calves with a lower immune system response, which makes them more susceptible to disease. Sick calves cost dollars in medical costs, losses in productivity, and may even die.

In addition, the cow is slower to return to estrus (up to 14% longer in one study). The chances for uterine infections are higher, conception rates can be reduced by 16% or more or the cow can be open. Combined or separately, these factors lengthen future calving seasons, lower weaning weights, and “new” genetics may be lost to the herd. Lighter calves and/or less uniformity in the calf crop can lower gross income. These are the “hidden” costs that a producer cannot measure readily.

By providing a calving school, producers, even experienced calvers, could learn more about

recognizing when labor has started, as well as how and when to help with the birthing process. As a result, producers could minimize the hidden costs of dystocia and thus improve their bottom line.

### *Our Response*

A calving school, “Cowboy Obstetrics - A Calving Primer” was developed. The school was designed to achieve the following goals:

- 1) Reduce the stress of birth such that a live, viable calf is born, and
- 2) Demonstrate skills and management principles that enhance the survival of all calves, whether born naturally or with assistance.

Dr. Bill Zollinger, Extension Beef Specialist from Oregon State University, was the featured speaker. He covered the review and training for handling abnormal and difficult births. Dr Jim England, Director of the Caine Veterinary Teaching Center at Caldwell, addressed disease diagnosis and how to collect samples for laboratory diagnosis. Jim Hawkins, Custer County Agent, discussed Expected Progeny Differences (EPD's) and birth weight effects on calving difficulties. Dr. Pat Momont, Beef Specialist at the Caldwell R & E Center, discussed the Beef Quality Assurance program.

The Idaho Beef Council, the Tri County and Lemhi Cattlemen's Associations, and the Extension Agents in Butte, Custer, and Lemhi Counties sponsored the program in Salmon and Challis. The Extension Agents in Gooding and Twin Falls Counties and the

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Magic Valley Cattle Association sponsored concurrent one-day schools in Gooding and Twin Falls.

## ***Achievements***

Over 200 people, representing approximately 125 ranches, attended the one-day schools. Calving expertise ran the gamut from little or no experience to producers who had calved thousands of cows.

To measure knowledge gained at the calving schools, we gave a pre-test before the school got underway. The test was designed to measure the effectiveness of teaching methods as well as subject matter knowledge. Producers answered only 35% of the questions correctly. Thus, calving experience did not necessarily equate to knowledge.

A post-test was given at the conclusion of the calving school. We asked for the same information sought in the pre-test, but framed the questions differently. Producers answered 93% of the questions correctly. We concluded that our teaching methods were appropriate and that we did indeed get our message across.

We also evaluated retention and adoption of practices taught by conducting phone interviews with producers nine months after the calving school. We attempted to reach attendees from each of the 125 ranches represented at the calving school. We asked each producer contacted the same five questions. The questions covered new practices adopted, calves saved as a result of the school and the number of heifers calved. We tried to contact each operation three times and were successful 75 times.

Every producer contacted indicated that (s)he had learned something “new” at the calving school. In addition, every producer surveyed could articulate at least one new thing learned from the school.

No attempt was made to determine the level of experience of those contacted. However, we did try to get a feel for the number of cattle they were responsible for by asking them how many heifers

were calved. The range was 1 to 1500 head. The average number of heifers calved was 65. By inference, our school impacted approximately 50,800 cows, if the average replacement rate is 16% for the 125 ranches.

Our survey data show that producers saved 1.6 additional calves as a direct result of what was learned at the calving schools. By contrast, data from Oregon State University for a similar school credits the program with saving an additional 4 calves/outfit. The difference in results could be due to the fact that Idaho producers were already calving when we held the school and had already calved most of their replacement heifers where we would expect the most problems. The producers in our survey indicated that the knowledge gained likely would help them save calves in the future.

The economic benefit of our calving schools can be calculated as follows: The average weaning weight for steer calves is 575 pounds and 550 pounds for heifer calves in Custer and Lemhi Counties. Local calves of this weight brought \$1.12 per pound for steers and \$1.06 per pound for heifers in June on the video auction. Thus, saving 1.6 calves per each of the 125 ranches participating in the school amounts to a total of \$122,700. Not bad for a day of training.

## ***The Future***

The last question we asked in our phone survey dealt with what else producers would like to know more about. We plan to use these responses, plus an analysis of questions missed in the pre- and post-tests, to develop more schools. Covering these topics should further increase producers’ knowledge and improve their net returns.

## ***For More Information***

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