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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MANAGING MAMA COWS

During calving season, it can be more important than ever to understand why cows behave as they do.

While giving cows and their new calves the best possible chance for a healthy and safe experience during calving season, handlers need to be mindful of their own safety.

Rob Eirich, Extension Educator/Director of Beef Quality Assurance at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, says uboth pre-calving planning and understanding of cow behavior can greatly reduce the risk of injury or loss to both animals and handlers. Evaluating calving facilities for maintenance issues and accommodating arrangement can be a pre-planning starting place.

“Make sure any calving facilities you plan to use are in good working order and safe for both animals and handlers,” Eirich says. “Since calving often involves a lot of night activity, use the best possible lighting. Avoid having areas in the facility with deep shadows where cows might need to enter. Cows are color blind and have terrible depth perception.

If there's a heavy shadow, they're not going to recognize what is is and they won't want to get close to it."

Keeping gates clean and in good working order can be key anytime cows are handled. Making sure alleyways and pen areas are free of clutter and unnecessary items can also be crucial to safe calving events.

"Inspect alleyways throughout calving season to make sure they're clean and not icy," Eirich says. "As calving time approaches, it's helpful to move cows as close as possible to the facility so if they have to be brought inside you don't have to move them a long way."

Because of their horizontal pupils, cattle have panoramic vision, which is nearly 360-degrees when they put their head down to graze. However, their depth perception is atrocious. When they see an object, they have no idea how close or far away its.

"This aspect of a cow's vision can come into play if you're moving a cow at night, using a spotlight," Eirich says. "Because the cow's depth perception is so poor, they may be unable to see where they're going. Keep in mind, especially for first-calf heifers, that the cow may already be stressed by pain and now we're asking her to go to a strange place. That's when things can become dangerous for handlers."

In order to focus on an object, a cow often moves its head up and down. When approaching a cow, coming in from the side, rather than a direct linear approach, can be less threatening to the cow. It's also important, when approaching a cow to move steadily toward it rather than stopping and staying still, which is predatory behavior.

"All animals have a flight zone, what I like to refer to as a comfort zone," Eirich says. "It's similar to a

human's comfort zone, and the better we understand how that operates, the more success we have in handling."

Show animals, who experience frequent contact with handlers, will have smaller comfort zones than animals on pasture who see handlers several times each year. Since cows have a strong protective instinct for their calf, breaching their comfort zone can quickly trigger a flight or fight response.

"The cow instinctively knows the offspring can't flee," Eirich says. "Which makes a fight response a large possibility for a new mother cow."

Time is often short when calves start to come, but Eirich cautions producers to avoid pushing their animals too hard during handling. This is especially true at night, when a cow may not be able to see what's ahead of her. Taking a bit more time at the front end can often save significant time in the long run.

"It's not unusual for us to push animals harder than we need to," Eirich says. "Be sure you're not overstressing a cow, forcing them to do things too quickly. Keeping stress levels low is beneficial for the animal and handler."

Since many beef producers begin calving in February and March, there's a high possibility they'll work with cattle in snowy and/or icy conditions. Planning activities should include preparing appropriate clothing and footwear to reduce the risk of weather-related injuries and slips and falls.

An important part of pre-calving planning can include clarifying how discussing how to respond to an injury to either animals or handlers and gathering any necessary phone numbers.

"Thinking through some of the things that could happen if a producer is in the pasture at night,

assisting cows can be an important pre-calving activity,” Eirich says. “In most industries, businesses have a contingency plan so everyone understands what should happen in the even of an emergency. Beef producers often don’t work through that process.”

Keeping veterinarian contact information close at hand can help a beef producer take quick action if an animal needs that type of care. Knowing if a veterinarian is available to visit the calving site and informing other family members and the veterinarian where the crisis is happening will make a crisis response faster and more effective.

“Being prepared to transport an animal to a clinic will make that event less stressful,” Eirich says. “Keeping treatment supplies on hand could also lessen the effects of an emergency.”

Producers may benefit from keeping spouses and family members informed about the projected length of a visit to the pasture or calving barn. That way, someone is more likely to be aware that extended time away from the house could signal trouble.

“A phone call or text to a family member would let them know that extra time is necessary to take care of a cow or calf and confirm that the producer is okay,” Eirich says. “Family members should also be aware of how to respond and have access to emergency numbers if a producer is injured.”

Because each calving event is unique, beef producers will reduce the risk of injury to themselves and animals by thinking through common calving activities and pinpointing any points with high potential for danger. Avoiding high anxiety and taking ample time in caring for cows and calves is an overall important practice.

“Preparation can be key to safely and successfully working through calving season,” Eirich says.

“Trying to rush through any part of it increases the level of danger for both animals and producers.”