

Ask A Vet: To Pull or Not to Pull

Sunday, August 2, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I purchased some bred cattle and am looking forward to having calves soon. A friend recommended purchasing a calf puller for difficult births– do you have tips on how to use one?

-To Pull or Not to Pull

Dear Reader,

I commend you for seeking advice on the correct way to use a calf puller or “calf jack” as they are often called. This is an invaluable tool to producers and veterinarians alike and can often be misused. When pulling calves, the rule of thumb is to pull with no more than “the strength of 2 men” who can exert approximately 400 pounds of pull. A calf puller can exert upwards of 2,000 lbs of pull – that’s an incredible amount of force! If you don’t have an extra set of hands to pull a calf by hand, then the calf puller is the appropriate tool to reach for.

First you must decide if the calf can be delivered normally. If a calf is going to fit through the cow’s pelvis, you can feel both the head and feet in the birth canal without any traction on them, and you can fit your hand between the calf’s forehead and the cow. Once it is determined the calf can fit through the birth canal, it is time to attach the chains. Place one loop around the calf’s fetlock and then form another half hitch below that. Both loops should be above the dew claws and tight so they do not slip down and injure the dew claws. It is desirable to have the cow laying down in a more natural position – this way, you will not be working against gravity to get the calf up over the brim of the cow’s pelvis. Use copious amounts of lubrication to ease the process. Place the “butt plate” of the calf jack just below the cow’s vulva and attach the chains to the calf jack. You should now begin pulling – it is best to pull when the cow contracts and rest when she rests to avoid unnecessary injury to the cow. Be patient! Once the calf’s head is out, you can slightly push down on the end of the calf jack to deliver the calf in an arc – this mimics the natural way a calf is born and allows the widest part of the calf’s pelvis to align with the widest part of the cow’s pelvis. Be careful to not push down too much as this could damage the calf’s ribs.

A cow who is calving should be making progress every hour – if she is not making progress each hour or you have been trying to deliver the calf for more than half an hour contact your veterinarian immediately for help. Contact your local veterinarian to discuss any concerns you may have prior to when you anticipate your calving season will start so you can be as prepared as possible.

-Dr. Ashley Miller