Calf-Killer Syndrome…

~ Maternal Cannibalism ~

Have you ever watched a momma cow lick and clean her newborn calf, and then turn on him when he tries to get to his feet? This is what I call Calf-Killer Syndrome. It’s as though these cows have a short circuit in their brain. If not attended to, they will eventually kill their calves. Until two years ago, I had never even heard of such a thing.

In 1997, we purchased some registered Angus cows with calves at side. The next spring one of those cows was in the process of severely thrashing her calf when Deanna found her. She gathered the poor little guy up and brought him home. Later we brought the cow in and gave her a very small dose of tranquilizer before putting her with her calf. That’s all it took. She went on to become a very attentive and protective mother. Since we had never witnessed this type of behavior before we made a few notes and temporarily forgave the cow. We assumed that it was just a freak occurrence that would never happen again.

Heritable and Repeatable. The next year we found a two-year old heifer that was beating her calf around unmercifully. It didn’t take much detective work to discover that this heifer was a daughter of our problem cow. Apparently this nasty behavior runs in the family. Within a week we found the older cow abusing her latest new born calf. Forgiving that cow was the wrong thing to do. These $2000 registered cows will soon be turned into hamburger, because I don’t want anyone else to have to deal with this problem. As heritable and repeatable as this problem seems to be, I often wonder if the breeder who sold us this mother/daughter pair had some knowledge of this problem.

In an attempt to acquire more understanding, I have visited with several other producers about this problem. Cliff Quick, a seedstock producer in Nebraska, shared a very interesting story about a cow that he once owned. Apparently this was an outstanding cow, except for one flaw — she was a calf killer.

Cliff tolerated this ill behavior because it was manageable and he didn’t realize that it was heritable. This cow’s first daughter was sold to another producer who later sold her for $10,000 in a special sale. This made it even more difficult to get rid of the cow. Soon she produced a dandy bull calf that was admired by many. This bull was purchased by an older fellow who had always been a good customer. Two years later, however, this fellow was very upset. Cliff said, “I lost a good customer because I was willing to tolerate that cow’s one weakness.” Apparently, several of this bull’s daughters were calf killers.

No Excuses. Roy Beeby, from Marshall, Oklahoma, once told me, “You should never have to make an excuse for one of your cows.” I agree. Those cows must be sold. Unfortunately, many seedstock producers do not adhere to this philosophy. They are willing to excuse and tolerate things like bad udders, poor dispositions, calving problems and infertility. It’s no wonder they have to find a new set of customers every four or five years.

~Kit Pharo