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BIG LESSONS WITH LITTLE ANIMALS

Life Appears in the Birthing Pavilion at Nebraska State Fair

Grand Island, NE – The magic of birth is one of the largest attractions at Nebraska State Fair. Four species of mommas give birth to their kin – mother dairy cows, ewes, sows and hens – with the typical surprise expectation that comes with never quite knowing when the next baby is about to arrive.

“The birthing barn is so complex that it takes an army of volunteers to prepare for it,” said Bill Angell, livestock division director. “Kids, their parents, our Fair guests – they come through here and see all the activity and they are just mesmerized. Life begins here.”

The Birthing Pavilion originated in Lincoln, before the State Fair moved to Grand Island. A partnership between University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Nebraska Veterinary Medical Association led to the birth of this special activity that continues to attract every age while educating patrons about life on the farm in real time.

“People can watch a video on YouTube, they can read about it on Facebook, but there is nothing else that can replace the experience of witnessing a live animal birth,” said Dr. Melissa Girard, head of the Birthing Pavilion committee. “We hope

that it gives people a chance to understand the great care farmers and ranchers take with their animals. And often in unbearable weather conditions.”

Gerard said animals are brought in during the Fair with a fairly certain accuracy of their expected birthing dates. “These moms have been AI’ed (artificially inseminated) to give birth sometime during the 11-day span of the Fair,” she said. “The birth miracle is brought up close and personal to any curious fairgoer.” Gerard said that dairy cows, the largest of the animals to bring their calves into the world, can be the most dramatic events simply due to their size.

All the animals arrive directly from the farm by Nebraska farm families. Pregnant ewes (female sheep) arrive in groups of three with new mothers cycled in halfway through the Fair. Their lambs begin to be born shortly after arrival and it’s common for sheep to have twins or even triplets. For the littlest guests, a highlight is watching the slow pecking ambition of a baby chick about to hatch in the incubator, located right along with the rest of the birthing animals. More than 100 eggs are brought to the Fair, and the fuzzy yellow mini-chickens arrive nearly every day.

Sows, or female pigs, were a special addition to the Birthing Pavilion. “Sows are so heavy that in order to prevent them from rolling on top of their new babies, we need to place them in farrower,” said Gerard. “It makes it easier for the piglets to nurse, especially when there are so many of them.” Gerard said people ask a lot of questions about the odd looking farrowing device. She said it is customized perfectly for a sow to keep piglets and mom safe.

Two to three staff members operate around the clock to care for the animals including veterinarians, vet technicians and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Vet Club. Veterinarians on staff have the necessary equipment within the Pavilion to assist an animal if there are difficulties, just like a doctor will assist a human mother in labor. Often the public will get to see the vet-patient relationship first-hand.

The Birthing Pavilion, presented by the Nebraska Cattlewomen in support of agricultural education, is located inside the Sheep Barn and is open daily during the State Fair. There is no charge to visit.

The 2018 Nebraska State Fair runs August 24 through September 3 in Grand Island. Ticket discounts are currently available at all Pump & Pantry locations or online **at StateFair.org**. Bundle prices, entertainment information and a schedule of events can be found online.

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