When Steve Hull, Ph.D co-owner of TimberLake Farms realized one of his pregnant dams was in real trouble. He immediately transported Chillota to the Oklahoma State University Center for Veterinary Health Sciences where Dr. Charles Broaddus, resident in Theriogenology, performed an emergency cesarean section.

Steve Hull, Ph.D., is a co-owner of TimberLake Farms, Edmond, Okla., one of about 35 alpaca farms found in Oklahoma. The retired professor and full-time alpaca farmer, has been breeding alpacas for ten years and for the first time, one of his pregnant dams was in real trouble. He immediately transported Chillota to the Oklahoma State University Center for Veterinary Health Sciences where Dr. Charles Broaddus, resident in Theriogenology, performed an emergency cesarean section.

To start his herd, Hull imported six alpacas from South America, where the breed originates. A cousin to the llama, they are kept in herds that graze and are valued for their fleece, which is used for making warm jackets, sweaters, blankets, etc.

"This is the first time one of the alpacas has required a C-section," says Hull. "She came through the surgery fine but it was just the beginning for the baby alpaca or cria as they are called."

According to Dr. Broaddus, Chillota recovered uneventfully from the surgery. However, as he was closing the incisions on her and the cria was taking his first breaths, it became evident that he was not fully mature.

"These ‘dysmature’ crias can be very difficult to save," explains Dr. Broaddus. "They only live with aggressive therapy."

And thanks to the teamwork of the Veterinary Center’s Food Animal Neonatal Group, the cria, born two weeks premature, did survive.

"Drs. Melanie Boileau, Robert Streeter, Katie Simpson and Broaddus were key in this case," recalls Hull. "He absolutely would have died and probably his mother, too, if it weren’t for the Veterinary Center and their great teamwork."

A valuable part of that team is the 4th-year veterinary students assigned to the case. They took turns providing round the clock care for the new cria that weighed only 12 pounds and was about the size of a miniature poodle. Because they played such an important role in his survival, Hull offered them the opportunity to name him.

"We use Native American names at TimberLake Farms and Kiana Adkisson, 4th year student, chose "Chinook" after the northwestern Pacific tribe," he said.

According to Hull this was a tough medical case.

"Chinook's clinical situation went from bad to worse. The first few nights, every two hours we had to take the dam's colostrum and tube feed it to Chinook. He was too weak to stand and nurse," he said. "Then he developed a lack of pulmonary surfactant, hypoxemia, an immature gut, failure of passive transfer, hypoproteinemia and then sepsis."

Eventually, Chinook began to respond to the feedings and constant nurturing provided by the Food Animal Neonatal Team. As his mother stood close by humming to her baby to let him know she was there, his vital signs started to improve.

At six weeks old, Chinook is running and playing with the other crias in the herd. Owner Hull admits it is a financial investment; however, you do get VERY attached.

"They are relatively clean, friendly and very attentive animals. A female alpaca will sell for approximately $25,000," says Hull. "We have mostly Suri alpacas. They have a silkier coat, which makes for a shiny, soft fiber that is very warm and doesn't itch like wool. We shear the alpacas once a year in mid-April. The fiber sells for between $6 and $8 per ounce. And shearing them makes them cooler and more comfortable in the summer heat."

According to Dr. Boileau, even though Chinook was born early and endured several medical problems, the young alpaca should not experience any long-lasting effects.
"He has doubled his birth rate and is beginning to chew on hay and grass to help develop his cud," reports Dr. Boileau.

"Chinook is quite a fighter," adds Dr. Simpson. "We discussed the fact that he had probably less than a 25 percent chance of survival. Dr. Hull wanted to give him every opportunity to live, so we pressed on. Chinook's survival is definitely one of those 'miracle stories' that none of us is likely to forget."