



Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson**, Kansas State University

Animal welfare and consumer relations

Providing a safe and healthy environment for cattle is not only the foundation for good animal welfare and efficient production, but it is also necessary in order to maintain a positive image of cattle production for consumers.

Day-to-day care

Day-to-day care for cattle requires that producers meet each herd's nutritional and health needs, as well as provide housing and handling facilities to ensure their safety and welfare. Cattle are able to eat a wide variety of forages and feeds to meet their nutritional needs. When cattle of almost any age and stage of production are housed on green, growing pastures, they are not likely to require a great deal of additional feed. However, salt and other minerals are required in all cattle diets, and growing calves, yearlings, heifers and lactating cows require diets that are higher in energy and protein than dry cows and bulls.

Cattle grazing dormant forage or being fed harvested hay or other forages may require a supplemental feed or forage that has higher concentrations of energy or protein than the base forage. This supplement may be in the form of high-quality hay, grain, grain byproducts or other processed feeds. Evaluating weight gain in growing animals and body condition in mature animals provides cattle producers with a simple measure of whether or not a diet is meeting the energy and protein needs of their cattle.

Providing plenty of readily accessible water is another key component in meeting the daily needs of cattle. While well-informed people may disagree about how long cattle can be held away from water without adversely affecting their health and welfare, the basic principle that cattle need plenty of clean water is undisputed. The time of year, the number of cattle, and whether the cattle are near the water source throughout the day or only part of the day all impact the amount of space and the flow rates required.

Hot temperatures in summer increase the daily requirement for water, and the potential for freezing increases the risk of failed water delivery in the winter. Range

situations when cattle are only near the water source for a limited amount of time each day require greater one-time access space and water reserve than cattle housed in small pastures or drylots with continual access to water. Stock tanks or waterers that are not cleaned can result in reduced water intake. Mud, erosion or other obstacles that make it difficult for cattle to approach a water source can lead to health and welfare problems.

Beef cattle are nearly always housed outside on pastures or drylots, which usually means that air quality and sanitation are good. However, cattle housed outdoors in most parts of North America must contend with extremes in temperature and humidity during certain times of the year. Extremely cold and hot temperatures can cause severe stress and health problems. When rainfall is heavy, excessive mud can prevent comfortable resting and be a barrier to feed and water access.

For cattle housed outdoors, make sure that cattle are protected from extreme wind chills by the use of natural or man-made windbreaks, and provide access to shade or other relief during periods with a high heat index. In addition, all fences, feedbunks, water troughs and handling facilities should be designed and maintained so that cattle are not likely to injure themselves and so the facilities can be used as they were intended. Everyone who works with cattle should understand and implement low-stress handling techniques to minimize the risk of cattle becoming injured or exhausted during handling. To implement low-stress handling, a ranch must have appropriate facilities and well-trained cowboys or animal handlers.

Providing cattle with proper diets; treating for internal parasites (worms) and external parasites (flies, lice, ticks, etc.); protecting the herd from avoidable contact with disease carriers; and using appropriate vaccines helps to protect the health and welfare of cattle and supports high productivity of the herd. By concentrating on nutrition, sanitation, parasite control, biosecurity and vaccination, ranchers can ensure that they are focusing



their efforts to meet the health and welfare needs of their herd.

Plan ahead

In addition to meeting cattle's daily needs, every cattle producer must be prepared for potential challenges such as drought, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fire, blizzards, and other natural or man-made disasters. While most disasters cannot be avoided, those that are reasonable possibilities should be thought about ahead of time. Planning for ways to provide feed, water and shelter to the herd as soon after a disaster as possible guarantees that animal welfare will be minimally compromised.

Finally, every cattle producer needs to have a plan for how he or she will deal with a severely injured or ill animal. Although providing an excellent environment with appropriate diets and a good herd health program will minimize the risk of disease and injury, all ranchers know that recognizing when an animal should be euthanized is critical to ensuring the humane care of their herd. Appropriate methods to euthanize (put to sleep) cattle have been recommended by the American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Every ranch should have at least one person who is trained to appropriately euthanize cattle or should have access to a veterinarian to perform this important function.

Time-tested principles of good cattle management are the keys to assuring the health and welfare of cattle herds. Increasingly, consumers are also interested in knowing that cattlemen are concerned about the welfare of their animals. It is becoming very important that you have a management plan that you can share with anyone who asks so beef consumers can be assured that you also value the health and welfare of your herd.

EMAIL: rlarson@vet.k-state.edu

Editor's Note: Bob Larson is professor of production medicine at Kansas State University.

