

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Managing Risk

Cattle producers face several types of risk that can cause serious harm to their herd or business.

Addressing business transition plans, ensuring human safety when working around livestock and equipment, adapting to regulatory changes or modifications in tax liability, and responding to changes in consumer demands and market signals are very important management priorities. Although, they are largely outside the scope of veterinary involvement. In contrast, veterinarians can provide critical knowledge when addressing hazards leading to herd problems such as low reproductive success as well as poor health performance.

Although cattle herds can face a wide variety of threats to reproductive efficiency and health, it is important to consider three aspects when deciding how much time and resources to allocate addressing each individual risk. These three aspects include: 1) how likely the potential risk will occur, both in the short and longer term; 2) how negative the consequence is; 3) how cost-effective are the potential interventions available to address the risk?

The risks deserving the most attention by ranch managers and veterinarians would be those occurring frequently to cattle herds. The losses can be large, but known interventions can greatly reduce either the likelihood of occurrence or the magnitude of harm from a

particular risk. Some examples of these types of risks include bull's failure to breed cows, calving difficulty in heifers, and calf scours.

To address these risks, recommendations to use the following can be made: breeding soundness examinations (sometimes referred to as a BSE), body condition score (BCS) of cows, using bulls on heifers based on predicted calving ease, as well as clean calving and nursery environments.

Preparation is key

In contrast, the likelihood of a foreign animal disease, such as foot-and-mouth disease, occurring in a particular herd is low. However, the amount of harm caused by this disease would be extreme and extend beyond the infected herds. Because this type of risk is different than the risk of open cows or calf death, the methods to address it are different.

A relatively unlikely, but devastating foreign animal disease, requires attention from herd managers and veterinarians, as well as state and federal animal health officials outside the operation.

The recommendations to address this risk include keeping new additions separate from the rest of the herd until they are safe to mix with other cattle and limiting contact between groups. This is in addition

to monitoring activities outside the control of individual ranchers by identifying where herd additions were previously located with accurate certificates of veterinary inspection (health certificates).

Having security at borders and ports of entry to ensure that animals and their products entering the country will not introduce disease agents is one other function a producer must put his trust in others for prevention.

Once risks are identified for attention, producers will want to find which local experts (such as veterinarians, Extension specialists, nutritionists, forage and range specialists, market advisors, lawyers and bankers) are needed to identify the combination of actions that provide the most cost-effective risk control. By thinking through the types of risk that should be addressed and finding the help needed to design the best plan for your herd, risk can be managed. **A**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kan.