

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Advancing Herd Health

There's more to selling cattle than just phenotype and genotype.

Good health for all ages of cattle starts with meeting their nutritional needs. When forage is green and plentiful, cattle need little additional supplementation (with the exception of salt and other minerals). However, when forage is dormant, cattle may need additional energy or protein in order to maintain their health and productivity.

Specific health problems cattle may encounter when grazing or eating hay include grass tetany, nitrate toxicity, prussic acid poisoning, choke and toxic plants.

In addition to a commitment to provide adequate forage and supplements, another key aspect to ensure high herd health is to provide an environment that is clean and gives protection from weather. Because cattle are housed outdoors, the natural occurrences of dust, mud and extreme temperatures are not completely avoidable.

Still, the best animal caretakers provide excellent environments for their cattle given the rainfall, snow storms and other weather events common for their area.

The greatest risk of death occurs at the time of birth, and disease risk stays high for the first few weeks of life. Considering the genetic influences of calving ease when selecting heifers and the bulls they

are bred to for their first mating is important to minimize the risk of calving difficulty. Developing heifers with a diet that allows them to achieve a size and weight compatible with delivering a healthy calf is also important. Consuming colostrum is very important for calf health, and a calf born with minimal difficulty is likely to be able to stand and suckle from its dam shortly after birth.

Because calves do not have a mature immune system, they are susceptible to many diseases that rarely, if ever, cause problems for adults. The most common disease problems for calves include scours, pneumonia, pinkeye and heavy parasite (worm) burdens.

A good calf health plan starts with calves born in a clean environment to dams in good body condition. Strategies such as the Sandhills Calving System move pregnant cows away from cow-calf pairs to new calving pastures every one to three weeks and keep the youngest and most-susceptible calves away from older calves that are shedding the most disease-causing germs.

Combining such an age-segregation strategy with management to frequently move feeding areas to avoid high-traffic, muddy areas will provide substantial protection from calfhood diseases.

Worms (or internal parasites) and flies and other insects cause tremendous discomfort, disease risk and production loss for cattle. Appropriate use of chemicals to interfere with the life cycles of parasites allows cattle producers to remove much of the negative effect of these pests.

By working closely with a veterinarian, cattle producers can implement strategies to control parasites for the short term while making sure they don't contribute to the development of pests that resist chemical control.

Finally, the use of vaccines to reduce risk and severity of some diseases, antibiotics, and other modern drugs to treat illnesses that affect cattle helps to ensure a healthy herd. However, they must be used as enhancements and not replacements for good cattle husbandry.

Following Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines to ensure all products are administered using the proper injection sites, injection routes, dosages and withdrawal times is a critical step to advancing herd health. **AJ**

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