

# Be On Guard for Rabies

Because it can look like other conditions, diagnosis of the fatal virus is often delayed.

by *Becky Mills*

**W**hen Randy Ours saw one of his feeder heifers slobbering and off her feed, he thought he was dealing with shipping fever and started treating her with antibiotics. She died. Then two more heifers started showing the same symptoms. The Purgitsville, W.Va., cattleman says something didn't add up.

"When we were doctoring them I took their temperatures and they were 103 (° F), not 105 or 106 like they are when they have shipping fever," he says. "Their normal temperature is 102."

It was Easter weekend, and Ours couldn't get a veterinarian. The heifers began to show more symptoms.

"They'd chase you," he recalls, "and they'd take off running and hit the barn, then fall down and bawl for five or 10 minutes."

When Ours was able to get a veterinarian out on Monday, the veterinarian suspected rabies. Ours recalled he had seen a skunk in the feedlot with the heifers about three weeks earlier. By the time he could get to his pickup and get his gun, the skunk was gone.

West Virginia state veterinarian Joe Starcher says that's usually how cattle in West

Virginia contract rabies — from the bite of a skunk or raccoon.

"Cattle are curious animals and will go up to a skunk or raccoon and lick them," he explains. "That's how they get bitten."

Ours' veterinarian euthanized the two sick heifers and sent their brains to a lab for testing. By Wednesday the diagnosis was back. The heifers had rabies.

Ours, his 13-year-old son, and four of his neighbors who had helped him doctor the heifers had to start a series of eight painful rabies vaccinations.

"The disease is transmitted through saliva," Starcher says. "When someone puts a halter or a pair of nose tongs on cattle to treat them, if they have a break or cut on their skin, they can get rabies."

By the next week Ours had another positive heifer and eight more with symptoms. The state veterinarian's office quarantined the 84 remaining heifers; but Ours, not wanting to risk spreading the disease to wild animals and possibly his neighbor's cattle, or put he and his family at more risk, opted to euthanize the cattle.

The dead cattle were hauled to a rendering

facility and the feedlot and barn were disinfected, although Starcher says the cleaning really wasn't necessary. "The virus only lives for an hour outside the animal."

That was about the only good news Ours had for the next month. West Virginia, like most states, was short on money. At first, Ours was only offered an indemnity of \$150 per head for the 600-pound (lb.) heifers.

"That was from a law passed in the '50s," Ours says. "That law needed to be changed. I needed market price. It would have been a mess if I had sent the heifers to the stockyard and they had gotten mixed in with other cattle. I kept them out of the food chain."

After a month, Ours did get market price for the heifers.

This fall, he'll likely buy another load of feeder heifers. Once again, he'll plan on keeping a few out for breeding and to add to his own 35-cow herd. But he says he'll probably vaccinate them against rabies.

Starcher says producers in West Virginia and in many other states can vaccinate the animals themselves, but only a licensed veterinarian can get the vaccine for them.



## Warning signs of rabies

Rabies in cattle can look much like other conditions, leading to a delayed diagnosis. That's when the humans treating the infected cattle can come in contact with the fatal virus.

"Cattle may show signs of respiratory problems, but this is actually slobbering because the muscles of their throats are paralyzed," says West Virginia state veterinarian Joe Starcher. He says they may look like they have something lodged in their mouth.

Be on guard for any type of neurological signs, Starcher advises. "Rabies is a central nervous system disease. They may twitch or fall down. They may stick their heads in the water trough."

Cattle with rabies often bawl for no reason. "It is a distinctive bawling. It is a different sound from their normal bawling," says University of Georgia veterinarian Doug Ensley.

If you suspect your cattle may have been exposed to rabies, call your veterinarian and don't touch them.

West Virginia cattleman Randy Ours urges other producers to follow their conscience and keep the animals quarantined.

"If you see any cattle with these symptoms, don't take them to the sale," he says. "We did the right thing, but we went through a lot."