



Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson**, professor of production medicine, Kansas State University

Health as an animal welfare issue

During the last few years, there have been several egregious instances of cattle and other livestock abuse that have been caught on video and distributed widely. These documented cases have given a black eye to all animal caregivers. Many cattle industry and veterinary organizations have mobilized to increase training for everyone who handles cattle so that these rare occurrences completely disappear. When these types of abuse are publicized, many in the public increase their interest in various aspects of animal welfare.

Best available environment

As a veterinarian and beef producer, I consider good animal welfare to be providing safe and comfortable housing that controls excessive mud, dust, wind, heat and cold; and supplying necessary nutrients to maintain good body condition and growth. In addition, cattle should be protected from severe infestations of internal and external parasites, as well as being managed to keep the risk of disease very low. Cattle should be handled in a manner to minimize danger to the cattle and handlers and to reduce stress to all involved.

Good animal care requires planning ahead and preparing for common challenges. Cattlemen deal with predictable annual variations in forage quality and quantity by planning calving seasons and weaning dates, genetic ability for milk production, and mature size to optimize utilization of expected fluctuations in forage supply.

And although cow body condition is expected to vary because the demands of

lactation and gestation do not remain static throughout the year, and forage availability and quality fluctuates based on the growth cycle of the dominant grasses, cows should be managed and monitored so that their body condition score never drops below a 4 (on a 9-point scale) and generally stays at a 5 or greater. In addition to the expected annual cycles in nutrient availability, cattlemen should be prepared to provide supplemental nutrition when weather extremes such as excessive snow, ice, heat or drought cause occasional challenges to animal welfare.

External parasites such as mange, lice and flies can cause great discomfort to cattle, and producers should work with their

veterinarian to plan a control strategy that keeps these pests suppressed. In addition, internal parasites can cause severe health problems in some parts of the U.S., and an integrated plan of animal movements and dewormer use should be instituted to avoid negative health effects.

Start with a plan

Because death is the ultimate animal welfare failure, and the greatest risk for death in cattle is during the first month of life, plans to control calf death loss should focus on preventing calving difficulties in heifers delivering their first calves, selecting cows with small teats, sound udders, and good mothering ability, and minimizing exposure to cold or wet environments and older calves. Good animal welfare starts with a plan to have calves born healthy and to maintain that health through the critical first month of life.

To prevent calving problems, heifers should be developed so that they reach their potential skeletal size, and bulls bred to heifers should be selected for their low risk of producing large offspring. If possible, heifers should be bred to calve before the cows so that they can receive additional attention. Calf scours and other calfhoo diseases are controlled by providing a very clean environment and segregating cow-calf pairs into tight calf age groups.

Planning for a clean calving and nursery environment starts with selecting multiple pastures that are well-drained, free of mud and that provide shelter from cold winds. If feed must be delivered to cows in calving and nursery pastures, the feeding system should avoid causing cows to congregate repeatedly in the same location, thereby creating muddy

and manure-concentrated areas.

To decrease the risk of respiratory disease in weaned calves that are shipped to commingled grazing or feedlot situations, calves should be castrated and dehorned as young as practical, and they should be immunized near the time of weaning with available vaccines against viruses (and possibly bacteria) known to contribute to respiratory disease risk. The calves should be trained to drink from a water tank and eat from a feedbunk. And they should be recovered from the stress of weaning before being shipped and commingled with cattle from other herds.

Other common cow herd diseases are controlled by maintaining good body condition, providing clean housing, utilizing available vaccines and minimizing contact with other cattle herds. Some diseases, such as sporadic cases of pinkeye, lump jaw and foot rot, are difficult to prevent, but should be treated early and effectively. Some health concerns, such as anaplasmosis, fescue toxicosis and liver flukes, can be problems in certain regions of the country and require an ongoing management plan. A close working relationship between cattle producers and their veterinarians will help maintain high-health herds.

In summary

Excellent cattle welfare is a goal for every beef producer, not only because the public demands it, but because it is the right way to raise cattle. Some of the most important animal welfare goals are:

- to maintain good body condition throughout the year and to be prepared for severe weather events;
- to prevent severe internal and external parasite infestations;
- to prevent calving problems and calfhoo disease;
- to minimize the risk of respiratory disease in weaned calves shipped and commingled with calves from other herds; and
- to maintain a high-health herd.

A close working relationship between cattle producers and their veterinarians will help maintain high-health herds.

E-MAIL: rl Larson@vet.ksu.edu