



Vet Call

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

Health risk when purchasing cattle

Every business deals with risk. The profitable business has the ability to deal with and minimize that risk. As producers introduce purchased cattle into their herds, it becomes very important to recognize what health risks are unavoidable, what risks are avoidable and what risks are manageable.

Steps for managing new cattle

One issue that is often not considered until a problem arises in the buying and selling of cattle is the health aspects of the transaction. While every business deal involves some risk, including health risk, the level of risk is not the same for every transaction. Producers and their veterinarians have options to lessen the likelihood and/or extent of negative outcomes.

In general, the less health information that is available for a sale animal, the greater risk the purchaser is taking. In many situations, the seller does not possess specific information about the health of the cattle they are selling or know the potential negative outcomes that may occur when the purchased cattle are introduced into the buyer's herd. Because a number of negative health outcomes can follow the introduction of new cattle into a herd, the buyer needs to be wary of taking greater risks than necessary.

When purchasing cattle to introduce into an existing herd, some potential health risks include injury during transport; the stress of transport; illness and/or transfer of germs or parasites to the home herd or purchased penmates; common germs of the home herd leading to illness of the purchased animal; and the purchase of an animal that is a persistently infected (PI) carrier for an infectious disease and, thereby, exposing the home herd to an unfamiliar germ(s).

The risk of injury can be decreased through careful handling during loading and unloading, good design and maintenance of transport equipment, and appropriate flooring and bedding in transport trailers. Organizing a transportation plan that includes considerations of length of travel, weather exposure during travel and skill of the driver to avoid excessive fatigue on the cattle will also reduce the risk of injury to purchased cattle.

Cattle that are stressed are more likely to become ill and shed germs and parasites that can be spread to other cattle. Even when

healthy cattle are transported to a clean environment in safe transport trailers, some level of stress can be expected. This period of greater susceptibility to disease and greater risk of exposing other cattle to disease-causing germs is the reason veterinarians recommend that cattle added to a herd are separated (quarantined) from the current herd for a period of at least 30 days. By so doing, the new cattle can become completely acclimated and recover from the stress of being transported to a new environment.

Even though the purchaser of new cattle is often concerned about germs or parasites that the new cattle may be bringing into the home herd, an equally important risk is that newly purchased cattle may be exposed to unfamiliar germs present in the home herd — causing the new cattle to become sick. This risk can be addressed by using a period of time, after the original 30 days of complete separation from the current herd, in which the new additions are allowed limited contact with a few cattle from the home herd. Older cattle that are being culled are often used for this purpose.

Risk of PI cattle

Finally, the risk that many veterinarians and producers consider first when protecting a herd is the event of purchasing an apparently healthy animal that is actually a PI carrier of a disease that is not currently a problem in the home herd. There are a number of important diseases that can enter a herd by the purchase of a PI. In my opinion, the diseases that fall in this category that deserve the greatest attention in many parts of the United States are trichomoniasis (trich) and bovine viral diarrhea (BVD). Other diseases that have persistent carriers and that may be of particular concern for some herds include anaplasmosis, Johne's disease and bovine leukosis virus (BLV).

Because of the amount of loss that can occur and our current disease-control abilities, no herd should tolerate the import

of cattle infected with trich or BVD. However, for some of the other diseases that have PI carriers, it is not always wise to insist in imports being free of the disease-causing germs. For example, in some parts of the country where anaplasmosis is extremely common, it may be better to purchase cattle that have been exposed to the organism previously and are themselves carriers. In contrast, if you live in an area with very low anaplasmosis risk, you need to protect the home herd by purchasing cattle that are not carriers. For diseases such as Johne's and BLV, many herds already have carrier animals. Insisting that purchased replacements be negative won't make much impact on your current herd's health status.

In summary, my advice is to have plans to keep any cattle potentially infected with trich or BVD out of a breeding herd, and know the status of your herd for any other infectious agents you may want to exclude. Work closely with your veterinarian to develop the best protection for your specific herd and to manage the risks of adding new cattle. In many situations it is helpful for your veterinarian to talk to the supplier's veterinarian so that the health status of your herd and the source herd can be compared.

You should have a quarantine time when you can watch herd additions closely for at least 30 days. If any of the purchased cattle show signs of illness during that 30-day period, keep them quarantined longer so that a full 30 days passes after the last episode of illness before the new cattle are allowed contact with the home herd. At the end of the quarantine period, consider exposing the herd additions to older (possibly cull) cattle so that purchased cattle are exposed to the home herd's germs and parasites while you can still watch them closely.

Purchasing herd additions that meet the genetic and marketing goals for your ranch is an important part of ranch management. Managing herd additions to limit the health risks involved is often an overlooked consideration in the transaction.

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