STRATEGIC PENNING

Systems approach focuses on preventing health problems rather than treating them.

by Troy Smith, field editor

'I t's humbling that, so often, after doing everything right we still have trouble."

A good many stocker operators and feedyard managers could have uttered a similar statement. At the very least, they have experienced the feelings those words describe. Veterinarians, too, especially if their producer clients handle a lot of high-risk calves.

That particular quote comes from practicing veterinarian John Groves, of Eldon, Mo., who was a presenter for the "Calf Health Management on Arrival" webinar series offered by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

According to Groves, his clientele includes many stocker operators best described as "opportunity buyers." They purchase large numbers of calves over an extended period of time, usually buying them in small bunches from many different sources.

Their objective is to add value to the calves by building pens of like kind that can be marketed to finishing yards. Managing the health of these put-together calves is the troublesome part.

"I spend most of my time admiring the iceberg that is BRD (bovine respiratory disease)," said Groves, explaining that "admiring the iceberg" is a systems-thinker's term for studying a complex problem, such as BRD.

Focus on root cause

A systems approach seeks the root causes of a problem. Rather than concentrating on treatment of sick calves, it also considers the patterns of events and behaviors that contribute to sickness.

"So, I think a lot about anomalies — things that don't fit with what we perceive as usual," added Groves. "Like, why do calves with identical risk perform differently in different (production) systems?"

There are reasons why one producer using unsophisticated treatment options, like penicillin and oxytetracycline, can have better cattle health outcomes than another producer using metaphylaxis (mass medication of newly arrived animals) and more advanced treatment therapies. According to Groves, it may be that the latter producer's system presents increased risk of exposure to disease.

Rethink system

"There is risk inherent to the cattle, but there is risk inherent to a system, too," he stated.

After 28 years of practice and much deep thinking about disease dynamics — how infection can spread through a population — and common yard management practices, Groves advised producers to consider cattle penning strategies as a way to mitigate the risk of infection among newly arrived high-risk calves.

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Filling a row of pens in order may be practical for ration management, but not for health management. Instead, Groves recommended penning new arrivals away from pens containing a high percentage of infected animals. Instead, pen naïve cattle next to pens also containing naïve calves, or next to groups with a high percentage of immune or recovered animals.

"Even though you're buying high-risk calves, they usually are the healthiest cattle in the yard," stated Groves, advising producers to protect them from the population by using pens of immune or recovered cattle as firewalls.

Groves said reducing pen size is another strategy for mitigating risk of pen-mate or fenceline exposure to animals carrying disease, including animals persistently infected with bovine viral diarrhea (BVD).

"As pen size decreases, the probability of exposure decreases," said Groves.

Editor's note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.