

Veterinary Link: Health as an animal welfare issue

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The most important thing that ranchers can do to ensure the welfare of their cattle is to manage their herds with good animal husbandry and health principles. Some of the critical management tools to protect cattle health and welfare are nutrition,

sanitation, parasite control, biosecurity and vaccination.

Nutrition

Adequate nutrition for cow herds is based on proper stocking density for the forage available, and proper

supplementation of grazed dormant forage or harvested forage during periods of the year when forage is expected to be dormant. Green, growing forages should provide all the energy and protein requirements of beef cows with the exception of salt and, in some situations, some trace minerals. Poor forage growth due to drought or inadequate forage production for the grazing pressure of overstocking can cause inadequate energy intake and poor body condition of cow herds.

Prevention of disease and death of cattle are critical welfare concerns for farmers and ranchers.

Diets based on dormant forages and harvested forages may need supplemental protein or energy, depending on the quality of the base forage and the production status of the cattle. For mature cows and bulls, checking body condition at critical times of the year, such as at weaning and during late gestation, is important for monitoring nutritional status. For growing animals, such as replacement heifers and young bulls, weight gain is a better gauge of nutritional status than body condition score.

By working with a nutritionist, range specialist or veterinarian to plan supplementation and drought-management strategies, you can ensure that the herd is receiving adequate nutrition to maintain optimum production, as well as good health and welfare.

Sanitation

Sanitation is often satisfactory or very good when cows are grazing. However, during periods of the year when much of the diet is being supplied as harvested forage, cows will congregate in the feed delivery area even if they are housed in a large pasture.

If cows are congregating in muddy areas during late gestation, at the time of calving or while nursing young calves, germs can build up to dangerous levels and the stress of a muddy/wet hide can reduce calves' disease resistance to the point that calf scours and pneumonia can cause severe health and welfare problems. Dispersing calves over a wide area on grass rather than dirt and use of age-segregation strategies such as the Sandhills Calving System will maintain a sanitary environment for young calves.

Replacement heifers and bulls are sometimes housed in drylot situations and every effort must be made to minimize mud. Use of mounds, frequent scraping, concrete, rock and bedding when appropriate based on rainfall, animal density and other factors will

allow good sanitation for cattle housed on dirt-floor pens.

Parasite control

Twenty-first century cattle producers in North America are blessed with many tools to greatly reduce the negative effects of internal parasites (worms) and external parasites such as flies and lice. Throughout the history of livestock production, parasite infestations have caused tremendous health and welfare problems for cattle.

It is important to work with your veterinarian to develop a strategy to use deworming and fly-control products, pasture management and other tools to minimize the damage that these parasites can inflict on a herd. Because parasites can become resistant to chemical tools for control, these products must be used wisely and in conjunction with other tools to ensure that parasite problems can be minimized for years to come.

Biosecurity

Control of many serious diseases of cattle can be greatly aided by establishing protocols to limit the risk of introducing a disease to the herd through newly purchased cattle, or from cattle or other animals that can come into contact along the borders of the ranch. Your veterinarian can assist you in planning the best ways to quarantine and test herd additions, as well as strategies to keep wildlife away from feed storage areas, and strategies to limit the risk of fence-line exposure to other cattle. Whenever disease can be prevented from entering a ranch, animal health and welfare is protected.

Vaccination

One of the most commonly used tools to protect cattle health and welfare is vaccination. There are many commercially available vaccines to protect calves and cows from potentially fatal diseases, as well as protecting the fetus of pregnant cows. In order for vaccines to be the most effective, they must be handled properly and administered at the optimum times of the production cycle.

Because vaccination alone is not able to completely protect cattle from disease, these products should be used in conjunction with good nutrition, sanitation, parasite control and biosecurity to aid the management of a healthy herd.

Prevention of disease and death of cattle are critical welfare concerns for farmers and ranchers. Good animal husbandry and appropriate veterinary care are important components of a healthy and productive herd. Working with your veterinarian, nutritionist, range specialist and other information providers will provide you with the tools you need to optimize the health and welfare of your herd.

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