OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

AGRICULTURAL NEWSLETTER

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources • Oklahoma State University

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The Cow/calf Producer's Role in Assuring Safety from BSE

The goal of beef producers throughout the United States is supplying safe, wholesome, high quality beef to consumers. Because BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) was identified last December in one imported Canadian Holstein cow in Washington state, the disease has again gained attention from the U.S. news media. They usually refer to BSE as "mad cow disease". The U.S. meat industry has a "triple firewall strategy" in place against BSE, which includes: 1) import controls; 2) greatly increased surveillance; and 3) feeding controls. The stepped-up surveillance has produced the most recent suspect case. It will probably be next week before we know the outcome of that test. When we hear the outcome, we will send you more information about the impact (or non-impact) of the result. Nonetheless this serves as a reminder that as cattle producers, **we are directly a part of the feeding controls.**

This disease does not pass from one live animal to the next. However the disease can be spread when a ruminant animal consumes feed that contains protein tissue from another ruminant animal that was infected. Therefore in 1997, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) enacted a ban on feeding most mammalian protein to cattle and other ruminants. It is important that all segments of the livestock industry are aware of the regulation and that each and every producer do their part to insure that BSE never becomes a problem in the United States of America.

Because of the outbreak of BSE in Europe several years ago, major U.S. purchasers of beef products (ranging from fast food outlets to upscale steak restaurants) require documentation from their beef suppliers of compliance with the ban and the FDA requirements for violative drug residue avoidance. This request for documentation began April 1, 2001. Packers are required to verify that cattle entering their plants have been fed and treated in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations. Cow/calf producers, stocker operators, feedlots, and dairies are all suppliers of product to the packing industry. Therefore, verification of compliance with the ban on feeding specified mammalian proteins to ruminants and proper use of animal health products is required of producers from each industry segment.

As a result, some livestock marketing facilities have asked for and kept on file documentation from cattle producers stating that their livestock have not been fed any banned feedstuffs and are free of violative drug residues. Livestock market operators realize that this effort involves considerable work and inconvenience to the livestock dealers, cattle producers, and to themselves. However, this is necessary to maintain a market for our product, and do our part to reinforce the consumers' confidence in the nation's beef supply.

How do I know if I am in compliance? First and foremost, never feed ruminant derived protein products to other ruminants. Examples of ruminants include, but are not limited to: cattle, buffalo, sheep, goats, deer, elk, and antelopes. It is suggested that producers have written documentation from their feed suppliers that the premixes, supplements and complete feeds they buy are free of prohibited materials. Read and follow all label instructions that

accompany purchased feedstuffs and do not feed products labeled with the caution statement: “Do not feed to cattle or other ruminants”. Furthermore, read and follow all label instructions on animal health and production-promoting products, following precisely all recommended applications and withdrawal times.

Careful records of animal identification, treatments, and feedstuffs should be maintained. Records about calves and yearlings that are to be sold should be kept for a minimum of two years. In the case of the animals that are known to be potential replacement livestock, plan to keep their records for the lifetime of the animal. For more information on best management practices for livestock contact the Cooperative Extension Service Office in your county.

Detailed news releases about the current situation are available at: http://www.bseinfo.org/

Prepare early for the first winter storm

Almost as predictable as the coming of the winter season, will be the quickly spread horror story of the death of several cows from a herd that was fed "the good hay" for the first time after a snow storm. Ranchers that have harvested and stored potentially high nitrate forages such as forage sorghums, millets, Sudangrass hybrids, and/or Johnsongrass, need to be aware (not fearful) of the increased possibility of nitrate toxicity. Caution is especially required if the cows are fed this hay for the first time after a severe winter storm. Cattle can adapt (to a limited amount) to nitrate intake over time. However, cattlemen often will feed the higher quality forage sorghum type hays for the first time during a stressful cold wet winter storm. Cows may be especially hungry, because they have not gone out in the pasture grazing during the storm. They may be stressed and slightly weakened by the cold, wet conditions. This combination of events make them even more vulnerable to nitrate toxicity.

The rancher is correct in trying to make available higher-quality forage during severe winter weather in an effort to lessen the loss of body weight and body condition due to the effect of the wind chill. But if the forage he provides to the cows is potentially toxic, his best intentions can back fire.

The best approach would be to know ahead of time the concentration of nitrate in the hay. If the producer is confident that the hay is very low in nitrate content then use of the hay should be safe. If the nitrate content is unknown, then precautions should be taken. Feeding small amounts of the hay along with other grass hays during the fall and early winter days can help to "adapt" the cattle to the potential of nitrate. This is not a fool-proof concept. If the hay is quite high in nitrate, it can still be quite dangerous. “Adapting” the cattle to the nitrate can only reduce the risk (not eliminate it). Diluting the high nitrate feed with other feeds can further reduce the likelihood of problems.

If the rancher has no choice but to feed, unknown sorghum-type hays during a snow storm, he or she should plan to watch the cattle carefully for 8 to 12 hours after feeding and to be ready to move the cattle away from the hay if signs of asphyxiation or staggering are apparent.

Proper Cow Culling is Important to Your Business

Cull cows represent approximately 20% of the gross income of any commercial cow operation. Cull beef cows represent 10% of the beef that is consumed in the United States. Therefore, Oklahoma ranchers need to make certain that cow culling is done properly and profitably. Selling cull cows when they will return the most income to the rancher requires knowledge about cull cow health and body condition. Proper cow culling will reduce the chance that a cow carcass is condemned at the packing plant and becomes a money drain for the entire beef industry.

Is she good for another year? At cow culling time, producers often face some tough decisions. Optimum culling of the herd seems to require a sharp crystal ball that could see into the future. Will she keep enough body condition through the winter to rebreed next year? How old is the cow? Is her mouth sound so that she can harvest forage and be nutritionally strong enough to reproduce and raise a big calf? At what age do cows usually start to become less productive?

There is great variability in the longevity of beef cows. Data from large ranches in Florida would indicate that cows are consistent in the rebreeding performance through about 8 years of age. A small decline was noted as cows aged from 8 to 10 years of age. However the most consistent decline in reproductive performance was noted after cows were 10 years of age. A steeper decline in reproductive performance was found as they became 12 years of age. In other words, start to watch for reasons to cull a cow at about age 8. By the time she is 10, look at her very closely and consider culling; as she reaches her 12th year, plan to cull her before she gets health problems or in very poor body condition.

Other reasons to cull cows:

Examine the eye health of the cows. The number one cause of condemned beef carcasses is still "cancer-eye" cows. Although the producers are doing a much better job in recent years of culling cows before "cancer-eye" takes its toll, every cow manager should watch the cows closely for potentially dangerous eye tumors. Watch for small pinkish growths on the upper, lower, or corner eye lids. Also notice growths on the eyeball in the region where the dark of the eye meets with the "white" of the eyeball. Small growths in any of these areas are very likely to become cancerous lesions if left unchecked. Likewise be aware of cows with heavy wart infestations around the eye socket. Many of these become cancerous over time. Culling these cows while the growth is still small, will allow the cow carcass to be utilized normally. If however, cancer engulfs the eyeball and gets into the lymph nodes around the head, the entire carcass will likely be condemned as not fit for human consumption.

Check the feet and legs. Beef cows must travel over pastures and fields to consume forages and reach water tanks and ponds. Cows with bad stifle joints, severe foot rot infections, or arthritic joints may be subject to substantial carcass trimming when they reach the packing plant. They will be poor producers if allowed to stay on the ranch while severely lame. They may lose body condition, weigh less, and be discounted at the livestock market by the packer buyers. Culling them soon after their injury will help reduce the loss of sale price that may be suffered later.

Bad udders should be culled. One criteria that should be examined to cull cows is udder quality. Beef cattle producers are not as likely to think about udder health and shape as are dairy producers, but this attribute affects cow productivity and should be considered. OSU studied the effect that bad udders had on cow productivity. They found that cows with one or two dry quarters had calves with severely reduced weaning weights (50 - 60 pounds) compared to cows with no dry quarters. Plus, cows with bad udders tend to pass that trait along to daughters that may be kept as replacement heifers. Two key types of "bad" udders to cull include: the large funnel-shaped teats and weak udder suspension. The large

funnel-shaped teats may be indicative of a previous case of mastitis and cause the quarter to be incapable of producing milk. In addition, large teats may be difficult for the newborn calf to get it's mouth around and receive nourishment and colostrum very early in life. As some cows age, the ligament that separates the two sides of the udder becomes weakened and allows the entire udder to hang very near to the ground. Again it becomes difficult for the newborn calf to find a teat when the udder hangs too close to the ground. Select against these faults and over time your cow herd will improve its udder health.

Cull cows when in moderate body condition. Send older cows to market before they become too thin. Generally, severely emaciated cattle have lightly muscled carcasses with extremely small ribeyes and poor red-meat yield. This greatly lessens the salvage value of such animals. Just as importantly, emaciated cattle are most often those which "go down" in transit, as they lack sufficient energy to remain standing for long periods of time. Severe bruising, excessive carcass trim, increased condemnations, and even death are the net results of emaciation. Very thin cows have a low dressing percentage (weight of the carcass divided by the live weight). Because of these factors, cow buyers will pay less per pound for very thin, shelly, cull cows. In addition, thin cows will weigh less. As you combine these two factors (weight and price per pound), thin cull cows return many fewer dollars at sale time than if the cow was sold when in moderate body condition.

Cull any really wild cattle. They are hard on you, and your equipment, and they raise wild calves. Wild calves are poor performers in the feedlot and are more prone to producing dark cutting carcasses as they reach the packing plant. "Dark cutters" are discounted about $35 per cwt on the rail.

Cull open cows. Why feed a cow all winter that will not have a calf next spring? Call your veterinarian and find which cows have not bred back. Cull them while they are in good shape after summer pasture and before you spend over $100 on the winter feed bill.

AREA CANOLA PRODUCTION PROGRAM

All crop producers interested in growing canola can take a look at the crop during one of the area production meetings. Canola is a potential crop being researched and grown with the hopes of increasing the quality of wheat delivered to the elevator. It also has the potential to be equally profitable as wheat and we can use wheat production equipment, like drills and combines that producers already own or can rent.

Each meeting will begin at 9 a.m.- Mark Boyles, Okanola Project Coordinator.

Friday-December 10th – Garfield County Fairgrounds, Hoover Building – Enid – (Make reservations – contact 580-237-3228)

Monday-December 13th –Kingfisher County Fairgrounds, Kingfisher. (Make reservations – contact 405-375-3822)

Alfalfa Production Meeting

Tuesday – December 14th – 12:00 noon – Canton Community Center

Topics to be discussed:

Alfalfa - soil fertility – Roger Gribble, OSU NW District Area Agronomist

Alfalfa – herbicides – Francis Beling – Dupont

Meeting is being sponsored by Wheeler Brothers, Dupont and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. RSVP by Monday, December 13th either 580-623-5195 or 580-886-2210.