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G93-1179 Finding Sick Cattle Early

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Finding Sick Cattle Early

This NebGuide gives guidelines for identifying sick cattle in feedlots.

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Pneumonia is the biggest killer of newly weaned cattle. Many factors influence the outcome of the disease, but one of the most important is finding the sick cattle and starting treatment early.

Finding sick cattle early in the course of the disease can be one of the toughest jobs any of us has. The necropsies and treatment records of thousands of cattle have shown that appropriate therapy started within the first 48 hours of the onset of pneumonia will improve a sick feedlot animal's chance of survival.

The most important early symptom associated with pneumonia is appetite depression. To observe this symptom, cattle should have protection from the environment, plenty of pen and bunk space, and cattle checkers must have plenty of time early in the morning to observe cattle. Never bite off more than you can chew or more than your pens can handle.

Time

The number one rule is make sure you have plenty of time early in the morning. You need to be finished feeding, identifying sick cattle, sorting sick cattle, treating sick cattle, and returning sick cattle to their pens before 11 every morning. You must be absolutely finished. It is very stressful to work sick cattle past late morning when the weather is reaching temperatures over 80 degrees.

Try to handle only the number of newly weaned cattle two people can feed, sort, and treat easily and slowly during the four hours from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. each morning, and stagger the receiving periods so that no more than 200 animals per person are being started at one time.

Pen and Bunk Space

Pens should provide cattle the opportunity to rest, eat, and be medicated with ease. Pens should provide approximately 150 square feet of dry space per animal. Bunks should provide at least 10 inches of linear space per weaned calf and it is best if the calf has 16 inches of space to eat. A pen 80 feet by 175 feet will provide enough room for a load of 500 weight weaning calves. It is not a good idea to have hayracks in the pen. Try to feed all feed in the bunk. Waterers should provide four inches of linear space per animal.

Protection from the Environment

Temperature fluctuations greater than 30 degrees per day are very stressful to cattle. Loss of hair coat insulation through dampness magnifies the effect. If possible, provide protection to newly weaned cattle from both dampness and severe temperature fluctuations. Windbreaks provide relief from cold winter winds but can prevent air movement when the weather is warm. Design windbreaks to meet both conditions. If overhead shelter is provided it should be designed to allow air movement, protection from radiant heat, and allow for drying under the shelter by permitting sunlight to contact all of the covered surface during the day. Overhead shelters should be at least 10 feet high, provide 189 square feet of covered area per animal, and be oriented north to south to allow sunlight to shine on all areas under the shelter.

How Sick Cattle Eat

The second rule is to pull for treatment any newly weaned calf that is slow to come to the bunk to eat. Sick cattle are generally slow to come to feed. All cattlemen know this, but few use this observation to their advantage. The best time to look for sick cattle is when you put out feed. If you don't have too many cattle to look after, you can remember which ones were slow and come back and pull them for treatment later. Pen riders in large feedlots may not be able to watch cattle come to the bunk when they are fed but the good pen riders watch the fill on cattle very closely because it is the best indication of whether the cattle have been eating. Cattle that have not been eating will often have a little bounce in their abdomen when they walk, and will appear weak.

You need to know the first day cattle are slow coming up to eat. Research by Drs. Dave Hutchinson and Andy Cole, at the Bushland, Texas USDA station documented that the feed consumption in cattle exposed to viral respiratory disease starts to drop 48 hours before a rise in body temperature can be detected. In fact, the consumption will drop by 50 percent 24 hours before the animal's temperature starts to rise. If you are carefully watching consumption you can get ahead of most cases of typical respiratory infections in weaned calves.

The Key to Sorting Sick Cattle

The best time to spot and sort sick cattle away from healthy cattle is after they have just been fed. As soon as the feed is in the bunk someone should be watching for the cattle that are slow to come to feed. Have someone stand quietly in the pen with them, and identify the animals that will be treated later in the morning. If the pen checkers are horseback, let them get in the pen early in the morning when cattle are being fed. If from the first day cattle are received you start this procedure and let cattle get used to

having someone in their pen with them, soon the cattle will let pen checkers walk among them without getting excited. When cattle start getting sick, your pen checkers will be able to sort sick cattle away from the group much easier.

It is good to have pen checkers work in pairs. They do not have to work each pen together, but having a second person close by to help if a pen checker is having trouble getting a sick animal out of a pen can be valuable for saving time and minimizing stress on sick cattle.

Other Important Symptoms

In addition to coming to the bunk more slowly, sick cattle will be a little depressed and will hold their heads a bit lower than normal. Their attitude will be a bit distant, they will be less interested in the things going on in their environment and not quite as curious. Often these cattle will try to hide behind other cattle or in the corner next to the end of the bunk. They will have less intestinal fill than normal cattle. They may appear slab sided, and their abdomen will shake slightly when they walk. Listen for a soft, repetitive cough and watch for a slight increase in respiration rate. Sick cattle will often have watery, dull eyes, a clear nasal discharge and will not be cleaning their noses as often as normal cattle. Their movement will be a little stiff and weakness will cause them to shorten their stride and drag their toe or knuckle slightly. You may notice their tails are tucked slightly between their hocks.

Sharpening Skills

The best way to improve someone's skill for finding sick cattle early is to let them follow the progress of the cattle they pull for treatment, especially if all treatments are given before noon. Cattle treated in the afternoon are much harder to evaluate.

If 90 percent of the cattle are responding to treatment within three days, the pen checker is on the mark. If the treatment program is appropriate and less than 80 percent of the cattle are responding to treatment or the relapse rate is more than 10 percent, the pen checkers are starting treatment too late.

Summary

1. Make sure you have plenty of time early in the morning. This is the best time to look for sick cattle.
2. New cattle need at least 150 square feet of dry, dust free pen space per animal.
3. Important symptoms to look for include: depression of appetite and attitude, slow movement, and rapid respiration.

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