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“Beef Production Strategies” article

Watching the Cattle Herd

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Be Watchful and Responsive

Close observation of cattle herds is considered good animal husbandry. But just watching cattle is not enough in and of itself. Watching them without responding to observed needs amounts to recreation instead of management. To start, producers must know what types of things to look out for when keeping eyes on their herds. Beyond that, producers must determine what actions are best to take when certain things are observed.

Observation Example #1: Number of Head

One of the first things many producers do when checking on their herds is to conduct a head count. This is done to make sure that all cattle are accounted for and in their proper places. Missing animals may be escaped, stolen, hidden, or dead. Injured, ill, or temperamental cattle may be either unable or reluctant to move with the majority of the herd. Cattle also tend to separate from the herd for calving.

If fewer head are counted than were expected to be in a particular pasture or pen, then carefully search the remainder of the enclosure to make sure that the missing animals are not actually just hidden from first glance. If vehicles are used to search large areas, be cautious not to accidentally run over an animal lying down in tall forage. Young calves are particularly challenging to detect. They are relatively small, easily hidden from view in low-lying or obscured areas, and may hide intentionally as a defensive mechanism.

Once a pasture or pen is thoroughly searched without finding missing cattle, then proceed to search adjacent areas. Look for gaps or breaks in fencing or open gates that could have allowed for cattle to escape. Repair compromised sections of fencing, and secure gates as needed to prevent further escapes.

Search for cattle in a timely manner. Escaped cattle can pose safety and liability concerns when they enter areas such as public roadways or private property. The sooner they are located, the less risk of them causing damage or injury or being injured themselves. Similarly, the chances of recovering stolen cattle are improved with faster reporting of this crime to authorities and others who can assist in recovery efforts.

Besides lost animals, extra animals can be found during a routine cattle inventory check. A common example is a weaned calf or its dam that have reunited after being recently and intentionally separated. Another typical instance of this occurs when a bull crosses a fence to reach females with the intent of breeding them.

Observation Example #2: Weight Loss or Reduced Gain

Weight loss in cattle is readily apparent in cases of extreme loss or for people with a trained eye for this. Weight loss may appear as lost body condition and/or muscling. In other instances, weight loss is confirmed by running cattle onto scales, actually measuring body weights, and then comparing weights taken over time. Besides lost weight in their cattle, producers may also be interested in determining if rate of gain is below expectations. Cattle may not be losing weight, per se; instead, they may not be gaining weight at adequate rates.

Weight and rate of gain changes should be put in context to figure out why they are happening and if they are appropriate. If scours (diarrhea) occurs in conjunction with weight maintenance or growth problems, then health and nutritional causes need to be examined. Parasite infestation and diseases such as anaplasmosis, pinkeye, and Johne's disease can contribute to performance losses to the point that weight or growth rate are noticeably affected.

Poor weight maintenance or gains may also result from poor diets. Lack of adequate nutrients to meet cattle needs could produce these clinical (observable) signs. Make sure that adequate combinations of quantities and nutritive values of feedstuffs are provided to achieve the desired animal body weight attainment goals. It is also possible that reduced cattle intake of feedstuffs is to blame for body weight losses or slow gains. Consult a veterinarian with health-related questions and a qualified nutritionist with dietary concerns related to this performance problem.

Whereas weight loss in growing cattle is generally deemed unacceptable, loss of body condition after calving is expected in lactating females. The energy and other nutrient demands of lactation are relatively high compared to other stages of production. This is best managed by ensuring that pregnant cattle are in acceptable body condition status as calving approaches. This allows for adequate nutrient stores to be accessed after calving to meet the nutrient demands of lactation. Likewise, nutritional programs for cattle that have recently calved should provide for the nutrient needs of these animals to avoid excessive weight loss and increased risk of rebreeding delay or failure.

Other Observations

Other things to look for when watching cattle are changes in behavior, injuries, breeding and calving cues, and location within pasture. The frequency of observation should be often enough to detect problems early to improve the odds of better outcomes through the implementation of timely corrective actions. Cattle checking should also be thorough enough to avoid not recognizing observable concerns that could have been identified with a more detailed or complete effort. Be sure to check not only the animals themselves but also their surroundings for hazards or to identify needed management practice changes.

When the primary person(s) responsible for checking cattle is (are) unavailable to do so, enlist others to cover this important animal husbandry duty. Make sure that the what's, where's, and when's of the cattle checking job are effectively communicated to these helpers and that they understand the important details of what they are being tasked to do. Finally, do the neighborly thing. Keep an eye out for the cattle of others, reporting serious concerns to the cattle managers when it is helpful or wise to do so.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.