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“The Weedy Pasture”

Official Livestock and Forages Newsletter for Southwest Alabama

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Welcome!

This is the first issue of a bi-monthly newsletter that is focused on livestock and forage production in Southwest Alabama. We hope that you enjoy reading this newsletter, and that you gain some knowledge from each issue. We would love to send this to you electronically. If you have internet access and an email address, please send us an email at kellewi@auburn.edu and we will add you to the electronic mailing list! If you don't have an email account, or you would rather receive a hardcopy, we will be glad to continue to send you one!

Handling Facilities – by Ken Kelley

Christmas is over. Everybody has gone home. The toys have already gotten old...and the credit card bill hasn't even gotten to the house yet. Football is over for a year. Hunting season is winding down. Now it's time to get back to the business of livestock production. Hopefully, you have some amount of

winter grazing available. If not....notice how your neighbor looks as he rides past you in his nice warm pickup to admire his winter grazing while you freeze to death on a Ford 5000 tractor taking the cows another 8 round bales of hay. Either way, we need to be getting ready for the winter to pass and summer to get here. Now would be a good time to fix whatever fences need fixing on the farm and/or update or build some good working facilities. February and March are much more pleasant to fix fence in south Alabama than are July and August.

Mr. David Duncan (one of the best cattle people I have met) told me that one of the mistakes folks make is to buy their cattle first, and then build their fences and working facilities and establish their forage. In fact, the way it should work is to build your fences and working facilities, establish your forages and **then** buy your cattle! There are some things to keep in mind when we are building working facilities. First, Plan your facility. Don't just go to store, buy materials, and go to digging post holes. Inventory what you have, i.e. old handling facilities, barns, or sheds. Maybe you can use these somehow in your new facility. Also consider your labor (or lack thereof) and the temperament of your cattle. If you will be working by yourself for the most part you will want to make that a possibility when designing your chute.

Next, select a site. If you are using an old barn or working facility as part of your new facility, then you may not have much choice as to location. However, if you are building a totally new facility, then try to select a place that has access to as many pastures and roads as possible. You should build your facility on as close to a level a spot as you can find...and you want it to drain (it's no fun trying to work cattle in a pond). If you are building where there is a slope, then be sure cattle are moved up the slope as they are worked. Movement up a hill is a normal cattle movement.

Working facilities can be as simple or complicated as you need them to be. However, there are some things that most working facilities have or need to have. The headgate is the most important part of the entire working facility. It should be sturdy, safe, and easy to operate and work smoothly and quietly. A working chute connects the holding chute (if you have a holding chute) to the holding pen. It should be long enough to accommodate 4 or 5 animals at the time. A crowding pen should be located at the back of the working chute. The size should be about 150 square feet and hold 6 to 10 head of cattle.

There are other components of a good working facility that should be considered. A good set of scales is a handy thing to have. Not only for making sure that you have a good idea of weight in order to give shots (vaccinations, antibiotics, etc.), but also so that you have a good handle on where your herd is as far as weight and size. When you are figuring how much supplement to put in the trough, there is considerable difference between an animal that weighs 1000 lbs. and one that weighs 1400 lbs., and it usually isn't very accurate to guess weights. There is a lot more information out there on building working facilities. If you have questions give us a call. I will leave you with a few numbers that you might be able to use when you are building your facility.

Holding area for cows – square ft/head	20
Crowding area for cows – square ft/ head	12
Working chute with vertical sides – width	26"
Working chute with vertical sides – length	20' (minimum)
Working chute with sloping sides	18-20" (width at bottom inside clear)
Working chute with sloping sides	30-33" (width at 4 ft. height inside clear)

Management Practices to Reduce Grass Tetany

(Submitted by Anthony Wiggins/Copied from ACES ANR-495)

Grass tetany is a nutrition problem for grazing beef and dairy animals. It is primarily a problem during cool seasons with highly fertilized grass and cereal crops. Tetany occurs when cattle are unable to absorb enough magnesium from their feed stuffs to support a normal magnesium level in the blood serum. Magnesium is especially important for certain enzyme and metabolic reactions in the animal's body. This condition is called a nutritional disease because it involves only individual animals and the feed they eat.

Beef producers have brought on many of the problems by using winter grazing cereal crops, neglecting their animals' dry matter intake, and increasing fertilizer applications. All of this results in low levels of magnesium for the cow.

Occurrence and symptoms

Grass tetany generally strikes only females. It occurs most often during early stages of lactation. Older animals seem more susceptible than younger ones. The reason for this is that the body reserve of magnesium, found in the bones, is less in older animals. Although wet cows are most often affected, dry cows and stocker cattle are susceptible when grazing any type of winter pasture.

Tetany's physical symptoms may not be noticed until an animal is down or dead. However, at the onset, the cow may show signs of nervousness, excessive salivation, muscle tremors, and rapid breathing. In advance cases, the animal will collapse, go into convulsions, and die.

Causes

Grass tetany is always associated with low levels of magnesium in the animal's blood serum. There are a number of reasons why blood serum magnesium is low.

First, cereal crops such as wheat, rye, and oats are low in magnesium content, especially in the spring and fall.

Second, soil low in magnesium will cause low magnesium content in plants. High levels of some other elements, such as potassium, will cause a sharp drop in the plants' uptake of magnesium.

Third, the magnesium level in forage decreases with cold temperatures or cloudy weather conditions that favor fast growth.

Fourth, low dry matter content along with high concentrations of nitrogen in forage decreases the magnesium level in blood serum of cows eating such forage. High potassium along with high nitrogen is more dangerous than either one alone.

Prevention and Treatment

Since grass tetany is due to a reduction in magnesium available for the animals' use, a number of methods have been used to increase consumption. Various magnesium compounds have been dusted or sprayed on plants to increase magnesium consumption. Properly balanced fertilizers and magnesium compounds have also been applied to the soil to increase the plant magnesium level. All of these are helpful but are less economical and are not as effective in preventing grass tetany as a direct supply of magnesium to the cattle. The real problem is not necessarily low magnesium content of the soil and plant but reduced absorption of magnesium from the digestive tract of the animal.

Thus, a mineral supplement in the feed is the fastest and most certain method of preventing grass tetany. Cattle should consume 1 ounce of magnesium oxide daily, and their intake should be checked frequently. Magnesium is not stored in the body long, so daily consumption is important.

Supplemental magnesium can be provided by several methods. Supplementation should begin 2 to 3 weeks before tetany is likely to occur.

Numerous commercial mineral supplements are available that contain all needed minerals with additional magnesium. At least 12 percent actual magnesium is recommended.

Probably the most economical way to feed supplemental magnesium is a 1:1 mixture of trace-mineral salt and magnesium oxide (60 percent magnesium). Cows do not like the taste of magnesium oxide and they may not eat enough of this mixture. Consumption can be improved by mixing equal parts by weight of ground shelled corn, trace-mineral salt, and magnesium oxide. Other grains or dry molasses that are high in energy may also be used to increase consumption. Do not use protein supplements, meals, or any sources of nonprotein nitrogen. High nitrogen feed ingredient would tend to aggravate the grass tetany problem.

Treatment of tetany can be successful if started early and if the affected animal is not handled too much. Recommended preparations and dose rates vary widely depending on the conditions that apply in each case and on the size of the cow. When signs of tetany occur, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

CONSIDERATIONS OF LEASING A BULL

Kevan Tucker, CEC, Clarke County
Anthony Wiggins, REA, SW Alabama

Bull leasing may be a viable option for many producers looking to improve genetics while avoiding the increased capital investment often required when making significant changes in genetic quality. Producers leasing bulls can often utilize genetics that have a higher dollar value than they may be willing or able to pay for through ownership. Another potential benefit is that, often times, smaller producers have only limited land resources which can prevent them from removing the bulls to maintain an established calving season. With typical leases, the bulls will only be on site for about 90 days, thus, allowing producers to maintain or create a controlled breeding season. Additionally, leasing a bull will provide producers with more options of keeping replacements from their own herd by preventing instances of inbreeding.

Bull leasing has advantages for the owner of the bull as well. The lease will provide a source of income which can be used to further increase capital for future bull purchases or simply to help pay for the bulls upkeep and care. Cash leasing rates typically average \$250 to \$700 for a single breeding season; however, rates will vary depending on the current cattle market and the quality of the bull to be leased. Also, leasing out bulls reduces the time a bull is idled on a particular farm. Bulls on farms with controlled breeding seasons are typically only used for 75 to 90 days. They spend the remaining 9 months in a bull pasture often times fighting with each other, tearing down fences and digging holes; not to mention, consuming forages and/or feeds. Having bulls leased out reduces the time, labor, and the headache of caring for bulls in the off season.

The major concern in bull leasing, by both owner and leaser, is health. Sexually transmitted diseases can cause reductions in pregnancy rates by as much as 25%. When sending out or taking in a lease bull, producers should maintain a strong vaccination program to reduce these risks. The health program for the bull, and the cow herd the bull will be used in, should be compatible. Producers should confer with each other regarding their health programs in their respective herds and consult their own veterinarian to assist in identifying any potential shortfalls in the existing health program. Any booster vaccinations should be given according to the vaccine label within the prescribed time period to provide maximum protection from spreading infectious diseases.

Bulls should have a breeding soundness exam performed by a veterinarian before the lease begins. This is important in all situations, but especially important where only one bull will be used. If the bull is not a sound breeder, the cows might not get bred.

Producers should outline and document the responsibilities of all lease participants in sufficient detail. This can prevent questions from arising such as who will be responsible for costs associated with the bull getting sick, injured, dying, or being an unsatisfactory breeder. Peril insurance should be considered when planning a lease as well as predetermining salvage/loss values. Responsibility for costs, whether shared or shouldered, should be decided up front. Making these decisions ahead of time will protect both the owner and the producer leasing the bull. In addition, determine who will provide the transportation both at the beginning and end of the lease period. It is common for one party to provide transportation at the beginning and the other provides it at the end of the lease.

Another obstacle in bull leasing is the fact that the farms must be on different calving seasons. An owner that has bulls in with the cows from January through March will only be able to lease the bull out beginning in early April. The producer wanting to lease a bull will have to adjust or develop their calving season around availability dates. Also, consider that bulls should be rested and fed for at least 10 to 14 days after being removed from an active breeding pasture and before being turned in with the next herd of cows. Producers looking to lease bulls may want to contact larger commercial farms (250+ head) for potential agreements as they will have large numbers of bulls from which to choose.

When considering bull leasing as an option, producers should compare the benefits versus the risks the system offers. The benefits may prove that leasing is a viable management decision.

“HOW MUCH HAY WILL A COW EAT PER DAY?”

(December UT Animal Science Update)

This question gets asked frequently due to producers being concerned about having enough hay to feed their cow herd through the winter. My response, one that is “quick and clean,” is 25 lb. of dry matter per day. Well, that is not correct in all situations. This is where the typical Extension reply, “it all depends,” would apply. It depends on the stage of production of the cows. Generally, all beef cattle will consume, or “eat,” approximately 2.5% of their body weight in dry matter per day of good quality hay. For example, a 1,000 pound mature dry cow being allowed hay free choice will consume from 2.3 to 2.6% of her body weight or 23 to 26 lb. of hay. If being fed average quality hay, the cow will consume about 1.8% to 2.0% or 18 to 20 lb. per day. With poor quality hay, she will only be able to eat about 1.4% to 1.6% or 14 to 16 lb. per day.

Submitted by Jim Neel

FEED WASTE LOSS WHEN FEEDING ON THE GROUND

(December UT Animal Science Update)

Most cow herds in Tennessee are fed hay on the ground during the winter. This practice can be attributed to attempts to keep equipment and facilities cost low and to “spread the hay” so that the young and “timid” cattle can have access. Generally the rule of thumb in hay losses with daily feeding of hay on the ground will run from 15-20%. With unrestricted access to large bales, up to 30-35% loss can be expected. With the “amount of feed that a cow needs” each day and that lost, it can be easily concluded that the winter feed bill can be very expensive.

Submitted by Jim Neel

Hope you got something from our little newsletter that could be of interest. We want you to tell us what you liked...or didn't like. Also feel free to offer suggestions for articles and/or other information that you would like to be included. Feel free to contact any of us with questions.



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