



Alabama Beef Quality Assurance: Managing for Good Herd Health

ANR-1278

A good herd health program is essential for a profitable cattle operation. Healthier, better performing cattle ensure production of a safe, wholesome product that consumers can purchase with confidence. A good program results in fewer medical bills, death losses, and quality problems. Performing recommended herd health management practices is critical for the following:

- sustained profitable beef production
- improved animal health and performance
- decreased costs and cull rate
- reduced drug usage
- reduced potential for meat residues and carcass blemishes

The Veterinarian's Role in Herd Health

Your veterinarian plays an important role in preventing, diagnosing, and treating disease. Selecting the right treatment depends on accurately diagnosing the problem. Work with your veterinarian to develop a health care program designed to fit specific needs. Establish a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR).

The American Veterinary Medical Association defines a valid VCPR as follows:

- The veterinarian has assumed the responsibility for making medical judgments regarding the health of the animals and the need for medical treatment, and the client (owner or other caretaker) has agreed to follow the instructions of the veterinarian.
- There is sufficient knowledge of the animals by the veterinarian to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the animals. This means that the veterinarian has recently seen and is personally acquainted with the keeping of the premises where the animals are kept.
- The practicing veterinarian is readily available for follow-up in case of adverse reactions or failure of regimen of therapy.

Disease Prevention

Investments in disease prevention are more cost effective than disease treatment. Some examples include proper management of calves at weaning versus treatment of respiratory diseases and injuries; isolation and retest of purchased cattle versus introducing disease into the herd; and calving cows in a favorable environment versus treatment of calf scours and uterine infections.

Develop a comprehensive herd-health management program in consultation with your veterinarian and other professionals who can provide consistent and ongoing support.

The Decision to Treat

Even with superior herd management, some animals will become sick. The decision to treat them should be based on specific criteria:

- Will the animal return to a healthy, productive state without treatment?
- Will treatment return the animal to a healthy, productive state?
- What treatment best fits the disease and herd management?
- Should the animal be sold?
- Should the animal be euthanized?

Many diseases are naturally controlled or cured by the animal's own natural defenses. Hence, a drug may only appear to work. Even worse, the stress of treating the animal may further reduce performance.

If the animal cannot return to a healthy, productive state on its own, another action is needed: treat, sell, or euthanize. If the decision is to treat, carefully evaluate the response to drug therapy. Professional veterinary assistance is essential. Drug therapy does not cure the diseases in many cases. Rather, it reduces the clinical signs, which may recur. Many drug therapies fail because of incorrect choice of drug, dosage, route of administration, storage of drugs, handling and care of drugs, or duration of treatment.

If treatment will not return the animal to a healthy, productive state, then the decision is to euthanize or

sell. An animal not fit for human consumption should be euthanized, using a method approved by the American Association of Bovine Veterinarians. Once euthanized, the carcass must be disposed of in a manner consistent with local, state, and federal regulations.

Selling a sick animal in lieu of treatment is a gamble. Only animals suitable for human consumption should enter the food chain. Ask the question, "Would I feed meat from this animal to my family?" Too many times, the decision to sell is reached after lengthy treatment. If the treatment is not working, the animal being sold is in worse shape than when the original problem was diagnosed. Also, consider the withdrawal time for all treatments. There is an excellent chance the condition of the animal will deteriorate after treatment is removed.

Practices to Ensure Good Herd Health

Maintain a sanitary environment. Building ventilation should be adequate to control odors and moisture. A clean, dry, bedded maternity area should be available in case of calving difficulty. The feeding area should be free of standing water, excess manure, and other unnecessary farm items.

Provide adequate nutrition. Cows, especially nursing cows, should have access to quality roughage as part of a balanced ration. Farm-raised feedstuffs should be checked for nitrates, mycotoxins, and other soil or climate-induced contaminants. Feeders or feeding troughs should be kept dry and free of stale, moldy feed and manure. Evaluate the ration periodically for balanced protein, energy, and micronutrients to ensure healthy cattle. Monitor medicated feeds, so animals being sent to slaughter do not consume them during the withdrawal period. Make sure all individuals who work with the cattle are aware of any medications in feeds and that proper withdrawal times are observed.

Use care when breeding and calving. Use proper artificial insemination techniques. Pregnancy-check exposed females at least 45 days following the breeding season. Use plastic sleeves and proper procedures and products when inseminating cows or assisting with calving.

Provide cows with a clean, well-drained, and supervised area in which to calve. Watch cows closely after calving for signs of normal heat and evidence of reproductive health.

Treat all uterine, vaginal, and mammary infections according to veterinarian recommendations. Do not infuse cows unnecessarily. Do not attempt to remove retained placentas; unless the entire placenta is removed, the potential for uterine infection is greatly increased. Placentas are not considered to be retained until 3 days after calving or if the cow becomes ill or lethargic.

Retain cows that are being culled for reproductive problems long enough so drug withdrawal times may be met.

Develop and follow a vaccination and parasite control program. Vaccinate all cattle for appropriate diseases as determined by you and your veterinarian. Make sure needles used for vaccinations are clean, sharp, and the proper size. Properly dispose of needles and syringes to prevent the spreading of disease, accidents, and to reduce liability. Work with a veterinarian to develop a treatment program for parasites. Use approved insect-control sprays in strict accordance with label directions, including container disposal.

Follow a biosecurity plan. All incoming animals should be kept separate from the herd for an appropriate time and then retested. This is termed isolation. Maintain fences to prevent mixing your cattle and your neighbor's cattle. Make sure outside individuals who work with your cattle adhere to clean, sanitary practices, such as clean clothing, clean equipment, and clean trucks.



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W.F. "Frank" Owsley, *Extension Animal Scientist*, Associate Professor, Animal Sciences, Auburn University; **James G. Floyd Jr.**, *former Extension Veterinarian*.

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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2.5M, **New Aug 2005**, ANR-1278

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