

TIMELY INFORMATION

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The Stable Fly A Serious Pest on Livestock This Time of Year

Stable flies are about the same size as and resemble the common house fly. They have been serious blood-sucking pests for centuries. They are persistent individual feeders with painful bites and do not quit until they get a blood meal. They prefer feeding on cattle and horses, but if these are unavailable will readily feed on most warm blooded animals including people. They are also referred to as biting house flies and as dog flies. Stable flies are opportunists and are able to quickly breed and multiply to produce very high populations when breeding material is available. The common and widespread use of round hay bale feeders for cattle creates an abundance of breeding material (hay mixed with feces and urine). Other breeding material often found for stable flies may include broiler litter stored outside without cover, outside hay storage areas and bedding clean-out from livestock barns. Stable flies will readily breed in any other concentration of nutrient rich high fiber damp decaying organic material.

Stable flies have a short life cycle (about 3 weeks) and are able to quickly take advantage of any suitable breeding material available to breed very high populations; additionally, they are active and breed at a lower temperature than most flies. They emerge from over wintering pupae cases on warm days in late winter and early spring. Stable flies feed on the legs, shoulders, necks and heads of livestock. The female must have a blood meal before laying each batch of eggs. They lay 40 to 80 eggs per batch and each female may lay up to 20 batches. After a blood meal the flies rest on walls, ceilings of barns, sheds and fencing.

The stable fly is definitely an economic pest of cattle and other livestock. Large populations cause extreme annoyance, interruption in grazing, blood loss and reduced milk production in lactating animals. They cause animals to stomp, kick and bunch together nervously moving to different parts of a pasture in an attempt to avoid the biting. The flies feed throughout the day with feeding populations peaking at mid to late afternoon. Where large populations are present stable flies often reach numbers of 30-75 flies/cow during the peak feeding hours. They are pests throughout the warmer months of the year; however, populations are highest during late March to mid-May in the southern United States. Fly populations usually drop to lower levels during the summer months with dryer conditions and less stable fly breeding material available. Considering that fly populations may average 15 to 20 flies/animal over an 8 to 10 hr. day and that the flies are on the animal only long enough to get a blood meal (usually 3-5 minutes) we can see that each animal may supply hundreds of blood meals/day in addition to the painful biting and annoyance caused by stable flies.

The most effective control are practices that reduce breeding material for the stable fly. This involves moving feeding sites for round bales regularly to reduce the build-up of hay and manure. Secondly, storing hay under cover reduces hay loss at the feeding site and spreading or disking around hay feeding areas helps to dry residues and reduces breeding. Adult stable fly populations can be reduced by spraying barn walls, posts and wood fencing around cattle loafing areas with a labeled long residual insecticide i.e. permethrin. Frequently, spraying the animals directly with an appropriately labeled insecticide will also reduce the overall adult population.