

ON TARGET



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July 2017

Making observations count

This time of year, you probably spend more time observing than working cattle. Calving is complete and bulls have been turned out with the spring herd. Fall calves are weaned and grass cattle are moving through pastures.

As the temperature rises, so does water intake for cattle. Their grazing activity moves to early morning and late evening, which presents the best opportunities to check the herd because “shaded up” cattle can be hard to find. We check cattle to watch for estrus and bull activity, monitor flies and look out for early symptoms of pinkeye or foot rot.

In my youth, a disproportionate amount of time in the summer was spent waiting on water. In the days before we all had automatic waterers, the task of checking and filling tanks was common practice. And since those days pre-dated the convenience of cell phones, most of the time I spent waiting was spent watching cows.

I suspect many of you can relate to this experience and now realize, as I do, that was when we honed our stockmanship skills. Daily observation let you determine if a bull was not doing the job or if a calf was not feeling well long before he was off feed.

Today, we may spend no less time checking cattle, but I wonder if we are as focused or deliberate as back in the day. Especially since we don't have to wait on water and there's technology handy to catch up on calls or other communications while walking through the cows.

It could be time to reconsider why you are checking cattle, beyond trying to count them. Take a call if the phone buzzes, but then get back to intentional assessments on location.

As the most essential nutrient, water offers the greatest opportunity for noticing problems or differences. Keep in mind that animals can survive a lot longer without eating than without water, and that becomes more critical in the summer as water intake can double with rising temperatures.

It's hard to tell just how much cattle are drinking in most cases, unless you only have a few head and a small tank, so the best plan is to ensure intake by providing a clean water source. That won't just increase intake, but will improve performance as well. Canadian research has shown a half-pound-per-day advantage in gain for cattle drinking from troughs compared to pond water. That's not limited to growing cattle alone, but was also observed in cow-calf pairs. Make sure surface-water sources remain sufficient in quality and quantity in the event of inadequate or untimely rainfall.

Health's role in performance and quality comes up regularly, but that focus is often centered on the weaning period. With calves nursing cows in large pastures, there's just as much need to observe them and assess respiratory health now, as dry and dusty pastures can contribute to respiratory challenges long before weaning.

We don't know much about how the typical summer health issues affect later beef quality traits, because pinkeye and foot rot are not as widely researched as respiratory disease. What we do know is, the calves that most fully realize their genetic potential for high-quality beef are those that never have a bad day.

Whether respiratory, pinkeye or sore feet, all health challenges result in a similar response by the calf: fever and reduced feed intake. The fever will ease with recovery but that reduction in feed intake probably cannot be overcome, based on some early studies in poultry. Though sick birds were fed the same amount as healthy ones, their recovery rate was longer or death loss increased.

Whether selling calves at weaning or producing a high-quality carcass, the key is to limit the days when nutrient intake may be limited. Since the natural “sickness behavior” can't be overcome, it pays to prevent and proactively detect the causes. We may not have to wait on the water to fill a tank, but we should still use our most limiting resource to observe the cows a little more closely this time of year.

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