

Cattle Business in Mississippi – February 2009 **“Stocker Cents” article**

Identifying Sick Stockers

Justin Rhinehart – Beef Cattle Specialist; Mississippi State University Extension Service

Proper and timely identification of sick stockers helps minimize unnecessary treatment expense and preventable production losses. Accurately pulling calves in need of examination or treatment is difficult but essential in order to treat sick cattle while not unnecessarily spending money on or adding stress to healthy cattle.

Sick calves can be identified in several ways, the most popular being rectal temperature and visual indications. When using visual appraisal, one of the most important signals of illness is appetite suppression. Some research has demonstrated that feed consumption of cattle exposed to respiratory disease begins to decrease 48 hours before increased body temperature is observed. The most effective time to observe the feeding behavior of cattle is when they are fed each day. Unfortunately, it is difficult to monitor daily feeding patterns of grazing cattle or calves on self feeders. In this case, it is important to observe signs of gut fill. Cattle that have not been eating and drinking properly will appear gaunt and their abdomen will often bounce when they walk.

Other, later occurring, signs of illness include labored breathing, deep coughing, eye and nasal discharge, bloody diarrhea or depression. Depression is noted as drooping head and ears, excessively slow movement, lagging behind the rest of the herd and reluctance to get up when approached. Again, these symptoms occur after sick cattle have gone off feed and their rectal temperature has risen. So, it is extremely important to thoroughly observe cattle daily to catch illness early and begin an effective treatment protocol.

When properly used, body temperature can be a good indicator of illness. In many cases, calf illness can be identified sooner and more accurately using body temperatures rather than visual observation alone. One common rule of thumb is to designate cattle with rectal temperatures of 104 degrees Fahrenheit or greater as sick. While body temperature is a good indicator of illness, also consider visibly ill cattle sick regardless of body temperature.

Body temperature rises in cattle infected with a disease-causing organism as the immune system begins to fight the infection. Some untreated cattle overcome infection and recover, while others suffer elevated body temperatures and show other signs of illness. In cattle that begin to succumb to disease, clinical signs worsen and body temperature eventually falls well below normal creating a dangerous health situation. Early detection of elevated body temperatures and rapid recognition of clinical signs of illness are important for effective treatment of sick cattle.

In order to properly utilize body temperature as a measure of illness, it is necessary to know what is “normal.” Unfortunately, normal temperatures for cattle rise during the day. Stocker operators must consider this in deciding when to use body temperature as an indicator for pulling sick cattle.

Cattle do not maintain body temperature in a tight range as humans do. Unlike humans, cattle expel body heat primarily through respiration rather than sweating. In fact, body temperature in cattle follows a daily pattern in which there is a period of increasing heat load and rising body temperature followed by a period of heat dissipation and falling body temperature. Cattle body temperatures rise during the day rather than the animals spending energy to get rid of the heat. Minimum body temperature usually occurs early in the morning, and then body temperature steadily increases during the day. The heat load built up during the day is dissipated at night such that body temperature falls gradually overnight reaching a daily low early in the morning.

Fevers are identified more accurately when body temperatures are at their daily lows. For proper identification of sick cattle, make sure that body temperatures are not taken too late in the day when false positives for illness might occur. While working cattle in the late evening may seem like a good idea, cattle generally need several hours past sundown to dissipate heat and cool down from an extremely hot day. It is critical to take temperatures before mid-morning. Producers measuring cattle temperature in the afternoon, even on a cold day, and letting cattle stand around for three or four hours before processing may identify cattle for treatment that are actually healthy.

Be careful to minimize exercise and stress just prior to measuring temperatures. Cattle should never stand for more than 20 minutes in alleyways or chute of handling facilities before temperatures are taken. Once in the chute, measure body temperatures immediately. It may be necessary to divide cattle into small groups that can be worked in a reasonable amount of time instead of trying to work the entire group at once.

A treatment plan should be in place once sick stockers are identified. Consult with a veterinarian to develop this plan and follow it closely. Seek out veterinary advice for situations that may require treatments not outlined in standard herd health plans. For more information on identifying sick cattle, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or a veterinarian.