

Cattle Business in Mississippi – May 2011 “Beef Production Strategies” article

Identify and Avoid Dangers to Cattle

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Most cattle operators work hard to care for their livestock. They provide cattle with proper nutrients, vaccinations, assistance at difficult calvings, and the list goes on and on. Keeping cattle in good condition, healthy, and productive also means protecting cattle from dangers in pastures, pens, handling facilities, trailers, and other places cattle encounter.

There are many potential dangers to cattle that should not be overlooked. Obvious culprits are fuel storage tanks, batteries, and other items that, if accessible to cattle, could allow them to consume harmful chemicals. Lead poisoning from old batteries is one example of this. Chemical containers can become corroded, rusted, cracked, weakened by sunlight exposure, weathered, physically damaged, or otherwise compromised. Cattle may then contact chemical contents directly from these containers or from leakage into the environment. Some chemicals can poison cattle with only small quantities consumed, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin or mucous membranes.

Metal fragments and other sharp objects present another danger to cattle. Not only can these items injure cattle by cutting or puncturing them, but they can also cause hardware disease if swallowed. Inspect cattle handling areas, barns, and fences closely for protruding nails. Loose barbed wire can ensnare an animal's legs causing injury. Cattle can even create their own hazards by tearing up otherwise intact items such as metal hay feeding rings.

When removing old fencing or other farm structures, be sure to properly dispose of the materials. This includes even the small items like nails and fencing staples that could become lodged in an animal's foot. Buried materials may become exposed over time with soil erosion or dirt work. The locations of these materials are sometimes unknown to the cattle producer, especially on rented property or owned land without extensive landowner knowledge of previous land use.

Flooding and strong winds during severe weather can create new risks to cattle. Flooding can erode soils and carry debris. Strong winds can bring in hazards from surrounding areas. They can also create hazards by damaging structures or equipment on the property. Be especially observant of areas accessible to cattle after severe weather.

In addition to chemical and metal hazards, some plastic items can pose a health risk to cattle. Plastic hay twine or wrap can entangle the legs of cattle. It may also be eaten by them. Plastic items damaged by sunlight or force can crack and break into pieces with sharp edges that may pierce cattle that contact them.

Equipment and trailers in poor repair can be hazardous to both the operators and cattle. Slick trailer, ramp, or alley flooring can lead to cattle slipping and falling. Leg and other injuries can also result if flooring that is not sturdy enough to support cattle weight. Unsecured gates or panels can fall when bumped can land on top of or trip an animal.

Poorly designed cattle handling facilities are particularly dangerous to both cattle and handlers. For instance, places where cattle may get their legs or heads caught and stuck can lead to broken bones or suffocation. Protrusions into areas of cattle flow can bruise or cut cattle. Investment in efficient and effective cattle handling facilities with safety as a top design feature is vital.

Some dangers are obvious, whereas others require close inspection to identify them. These dangers are “invisible” upon casual observation. Mycotoxins, poisonous plants, and pathogens (bacteria, viruses, protozoa, etc.) are examples of such health risks. This is the case with mycotoxins produced on moldy feed. The mold is not always visible upon inspection. Poisonous plants may be present in isolated areas of pastures and not easily seen. Poisonous plant seed can be brought in by animals, with hay, and by other means. It is a good idea to inspect grazing and holding areas on a regular basis. Bacteria, viruses, and protozoa are too small to be viewed with the naked eye, but they are the major causes of many diseases of economic importance in cattle production. Blackleg, bovine respiratory disease, and trichomoniasis are just some of the diseases to which cattle are susceptible.

Muddy areas are common throughout Mississippi. These areas are prime hosts to disease pathogens. They can even trap animals, especially young calves. In addition, mud can camouflage some of the hazards described previously, such as metal fragments and wires.

While it may not be possible to totally eliminate all dangers to cattle on the farm, injury and disease risks can be reduced. Start with close inspection of all areas accessible to cattle. Remove metal debris and other items that could cause cattle injuries. Keep handling facilities, fences, machinery, and trailers in good repair. Develop appropriate herd health and biosecurity programs for each cattle operation in consultation with a veterinarian. Then implement these programs with proper timing.

Always be observant of cattle behavior, performance, and condition to determine when there might be a problem that needs addressing. Be on constant lookout for injured or ill cattle, and be prepared to provide immediate care for these animals. This is important from animal welfare, productivity, and economic standpoints and is applicable to all cattle operations. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.