

Arkansas Ranchers And Poultry Producers Face Huge Problems

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Arkansas ranchers and poultry producers who lost animals from Tuesday's tornado in northcentral Arkansas were left Thursday with a huge problem – how to dispose of dead animals.

County agents with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service said it's difficult to determine how many head of cattle were killed, but it's certain to be at least in the hundreds. Thousands of chickens were killed in collapsed poultry houses.

Some cows were picked up and blown to their death, while others were killed by flying debris, collapsing structures or falling trees. Others have simply wandered away, says Dr. Tom Troxel, professor and associate head of the university's Animal Science Department.

Troxel said a serious weather-related problem is the destruction of fences. The cattle producer's top priority becomes repairing fences and gathering loose cattle.

Other serious concerns will be clearing a large amount of debris from stock ponds and pastures. He said a field can be littered with pipe, bits of metal, nails, lumber, splintered logs and other trash that can injure cows ingesting it.

"It's especially critical in hay meadows," he said. "Ranchers typically bale hay in the spring, and if they don't get the trash picked up, it'll end up in hay bales." Fortunately, he said, the grass is dormant and short so trash will be easier to spot and pick up.

Troxel noted that some producers have lost barns and hay bales. He said it's getting near the end of hay feeding season, so supplies were already getting short.

How do ranchers deal with disposing of dead animals in the field?

Troxel didn't know of any rendering companies that could pick up animals. He said the best option is composting, but in some areas of the state, burial may be another option.

Dr. Karl VanDevender, an extension engineer, said composting large animals, under the current Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission regulations, is a "fairly straight forward and easy process."

He said the producer needs to place an animal on a bed of about 2 feet of carbon material, such as sawdust or straw, and cover it on the top and sides with a foot of carbon material.

"Green sawdust is the gold standard but it can't be from a poultry house where it has been used as litter. It must be free from manure, according to EPA regulations," he said.

The material below the animal catches fluids and the material on top and sides is an organic filter to absorb odor.

"If you do it right, you won't smell anything and have minimal problems from dogs or coyotes. If you do have a problem, you can put an

electric fence around the compost," VanDevender said.

He said the compost pile will reach at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit. A mature cow can be almost "cooked to almost nothing" in as little as 30 days, he said, but typically, it takes three to six months.

VanDevender stressed that the compost pile should be in a place that won't endanger water quality in the area.

"If done properly," he said, "a producer can walk off and leave it without worrying. After six



months, the producer can return and spread the pile on the pasture."

The extension engineer said there are a few commercial composting operations in northwest Arkansas that will take dead animals for disposal. He said they need to have a license to operate in Arkansas and must be licensed to dispose of carcasses.

"Burial may be a possibility for some producers," VanDevender said. "But as one dairy producer told me, 'I don't want to take my best ground and turn it into a cow graveyard.' And it's expensive to hire someone to come in with a backhoe and dig a hole."

VanDevender said the Natural Resources Conservation Service is working with farmers to defray disposal costs.

Open burning is not acceptable under Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality air regulations.

For more information, ask your county extension agent for a fact sheets titled Organic Burial Composting of Cattle Mortality (FSA1044). The fact sheet is also online by going to www.uaex.edu and selecting Search, then FSA1044. VanDevender said poultry producers should consult the companies they contract with for the best disposal methods.

The state regulations about animal disposal can be found on the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry's Web site at www.arlpc.org. Follow the home page links to their regulations. Δ