



Cows with an advanced stage of fescue foot and no chance of recovery.

Photo by Eldon Cole, University of Missouri Extension.

Fescue Foot Alert For Southwest Missouri

MT. VERNON, MO.

Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension, says farmers in southwest Missouri should be watching for symptoms of fescue foot in their cattle, especially as winter sets in and temperatures get colder.

"Already, I've had a lot of calls about it," said Cole. "A farmer called around the first of December to report he had six or seven cows and a bull come down with fescue foot in mid-November. The herd of 20 cows and calves were put in the pasture on November 5."

According to Cole, the suspect pasture was new to the farmer so he had no history of past fescue sensitivity of cattle to the pasture.

"His first question was, 'should I test the grass?' I assured him that an easy, inexpensive test for the toxin, ergovaline, was not available. The fact that one-third of his herd showed symptoms proved the toxin was present," said Cole.

The outbreak of fescue foot this year is not a guarantee it will occur in the future. Cole says he knows farmers who go 20 years of no problems on a pasture and then all of a sudden lameness shows up one year and is gone the next.

"As the winter progresses and gets colder, more cattle in this area could show fescue foot symptoms. The first classic symptom is apparent lameness in the rear feet and legs," said Cole.

The lameness is a result of the lack of blood

circulation to the extreme parts of the body such as the tail, ears and rear feet due to the constriction of the blood vessels of the body.

The lameness is most apparent early in the morning when the cattle get up and start moving. Their movement has been described as if they were walking on egg shells.

"As they move, I've even seen them stop and lift a rear foot and flick it or even lick it in an attempt to ease the discomfort," said Cole.

If symptoms are observed, Cole says to remove the affected animals from that pasture as soon as possible.

"Putting them in a smaller, non-fescue pasture where supplement can be fed is the best option but at the very least, put them on a different fescue pasture," said Cole.

Some cattle are more sensitive to the toxins and even after taking them off the "hot" pasture, their condition may worsen. Their hoof, pastern, dewclaw area may swell and develop a break in the skin all around that area and the hoof may eventually fall off. Tail switches may also be lost in less severe situations.

"Dilution of the cattle's diet with a high energy feed or non-toxic hay is the preventive recommendation. Antibiotic treatments, normally used for foot rot, are usually not effective," said Cole.

Since fescue sensitivity does affect some cattle more than others, Cole says breeders should keep track of those animals in their data books.

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