

# Consider Both Cause And Prevention

## Summer Cattle Deaths Have Peaked This Year

**MT. VERNON, MO.**

The summer of 2011 has been difficult for southwest Missouri livestock producers according to Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension for more than 40 years.

"I believe there have been more deaths of cattle and abortions in southwest Missouri this summer than in a long time," said Cole. "It's hard to tell how many open cows will be found at preg checking this fall. It all adds up to a big loss for all sectors of the beef production enterprise."

Although official records on cattle deaths in the region are not maintained, the rendering plant located in southwest Missouri reports that their pickups are easily more than twice the amount as this same time period a year ago. Plus, there are a number of cattle deaths they are not called on.

### WINTER COATS

There are a variety of causes for the cattle deaths but Cole says most will ultimately be blamed on the unusually hot and dry weather experienced in a big part of the Midwest.

"We know elevated body temperatures can cause stress that, if not reduced, results in death," said Cole. "The forage we rely on a lot, fescue can also be a factor. It contains a fungus capable of producing a toxin, ergovaline."

Ergovaline interferes with heat dissipation from the cattle's body and it causes them to retain their long hair coats.

"This hair coat can be likened to us wearing our warmest winter wear on a day when the heat index is 110 degrees or more," said Cole. "A number of the animal's bodily functions – like respiration, digestion and reproduction – can then be compromised."

### FEEDLOT LESSON

Cole visited some Kansas feedyards the first week of August (when the heat was still prevalent but not at its peak) and he says the cattle he saw with their "winter coats" on were under heat stress.

"I'm not sure where all of the stressed cattle came from but one manager said the lot had received a large shipment from southwest Missouri a few days earlier and that they were 'fescue cattle.' During a hot day they lost eight head and six were from the Missouri group," said Cole.

Cole said that visual demonstrated to him that we have to work harder at converting and diluting our "hot" fescue pastures and hay fields in

southwest Missouri.

"Increased attention should be paid to selecting cattle with the genetics to better tolerate the negative effects of ergovaline. We have seen cattle within all breeds that seem to handle the heat better than others. Let's include early hair shedding and heat tolerance more in breeding stock selection," said Cole.

At the same time, feedlots suffer the greatest death loss during these hot, humid, still days. The heavy cattle nearing slaughter time are the ones most at risk as shade is usually not part of a western feedlots facilities.

### NITRATE WARNING

Besides deaths and subpar production from



**A steer seeks relief in a mudhole.**

Photos by Eldon Cole

fescue, there can be other forage-related problems such as nitrates in summer annual forages, and stunted corn. Pigweed, johnsongrass and perilla mint are known poisonous plants that may be grazed by hungry cattle given an opportunity to eat something green during dry, hot weather when pastures are short.

The johnsongrass and sorghum-sudans also have the potential to kill due to a compound known as prussic acid.

"We have seen cattle die in pastures containing johnsongrass but it's not always clear whether the cause was nitrates or prussic acid since very few are posted by a veterinarian," said Cole.

As summer turns into fall, rains should help the pastures rebound and death losses will drop.

However, Cole does offer this word of caution. If forages were harvested for hay or silage and there is a chance the nitrate level is high, invest in a lab test for nitrates for less than \$10.

"Most nitrate-bearing feeds can be managed if you know the level of nitrates in them," said Cole. Δ



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