Control those pesky flies

It is time to control those pesky flies. Flies cost the cattle industry over $500 million annually due to decreased weight gains and milk production along with the spread of pinkeye and anaplasmosis.

Flies that attack beef cattle are classified as biting or non-biting. The non-biting flies include face flies and house flies and the biting flies include horn flies, stable flies, horse flies, and many species of gnats.

Non-biting flies feed on liquid material around the eyes, nose, mouth, and blood from wounds. They cause eye inflammation and transmit eye disease organisms. Biting flies feed by piercing the animal's skin and sucking blood. Two of the more common flies effecting cattle are face and horn flies.

Face flies feed on secretions around the eyes, nose, and mouth; just as their name implies. These flies are carriers and spreaders of bacteria, which cause pinkeye. Virginia Tech animal scientists summarized research indicating calves diagnosed with pinkeye weighed 19.6 pounds less at weaning than healthy calves, while another study showed the loss to pinkeye to be 36 to 40 pounds at weaning. Face flies spend very little time on the animal. As a result, the control of face flies is much less effective because the fly is only exposed to a small amount of insecticide.

Horn flies are of the greatest economic importance to cattle. The horn fly feeds about 20 to 30 times a day, primarily on the back and shoulders of cattle. Horn flies spend their entire life cycle on cattle, only leaving to lay eggs in fresh manure.

For fly control, there are several products on the market that are available. There are insecticide ear tags, pour-ons, sprays, back rubbers, dust bags, and oral larvacides. For effective fly control, it may require a combination of products.

Insecticide ear tags can be highly effective in controlling horn flies and are as effective as any other method to control face flies. There are two categories of fly tags available: pyrethroids and organophosphates. Horn flies can become resistant to pyrethroids, thus resulting in variable control. Face flies are not resistant to pyrethroid-containing ear tags. Organophosphate tags give good control of horn flies with no evidence of resistance, but poor control of face flies. Many producers utilize fly tags for fly control and place them in the ear early in the season. Although this may be the most convenient, it may not be the best timing. The fly tags are designed to provide control for a specific time length and most of the fly problems occur later in the grazing season. Timing is critical and the strength of the insecticide tends to reduce its effectiveness as time passes. Therefore, if fly tags were placed in the cow's ear a month or two ago, then the effectiveness for fly control has diminished when peak fly populations are occurring now. In addition, rotating year to year on type of fly tags (pyrethroids or organophosphates) is suggested. At the end of the fly season, it is important to remove the fly tags to prevent resistance to the insecticide from constant exposure of sub-lethal doses.

Pour-ons and sprays can be very effective. These products can provide an immediate response in control, but are short in duration (typically less than 30 days) and require reapplication throughout the fly season. Back rubbers, fly strips, dust bags can be an effective if they are strategically located for animal use
(mineral feeders, watering areas, etc.). Oral larvacides work by inhibiting larval development, breaking the fly's life cycle, and should be started in the spring. However, if your neighbor is not using a similar control method, then flies can be expected to cross the fence and cause problems.

Remember, the economic threshold of when fly control is necessary is when fly populations are greater than 200 flies per animal. Any fly control that keeps the fly population below the 200 flies per animal level gives the same economic performance regardless of the level of control.

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