LIMPING CATTLE?

Have you noticed some of your cattle limping a little? Sometimes they may limp a lot, not just after they get off their beds in the morning. Most people when they see cattle limp think first, foot rot. That is a possibility, but if the sore footedness is almost always a back foot, think fescue foot in cold weather. If you’ve treated them with an antibiotic for foot rot with no response, it’s even more likely the problem is fescue foot.

Fescue foot is a result of cattle grazing endophyte infected fescue that for some reason has produced a large amount of ergovaline. Normally the culprit fescue will be tall, season-long or lush fall growth that came along after heavy nitrogen application. If sensitive cattle eat enough of the toxin-bearing fescue, it results in constriction of the animals blood vessels. The constriction means normal blood flow to the extremities of the animal’s body, such as rear feet and the tail, results in swelling of the pastern-hock area. A line of demarcation (shown below) that resembles a wire being wrapped around the leg appears along with a dry gangrene that may result in sloughing of the lower limb.

Sub-freezing weather worsens the damage due to frost bite. Once the break in the skin is evident, the animal is probably a goner. The hoof can completely fall off making it difficult for them to move around. In addition to the leg/hoof issue the animal has other issues. They will draw up and lose a significant amount of weight. They can be fed a high concentrate diet, good quality non-fescue hay and be pampered in a small rock-free pen and they don’t seem to get better.

In a herd of cattle you usually only have 10 to 15 percent that show the really bad hoof problems I’ve described. However, a higher percent may show other subtle symptoms such as grown out hooves in a few months. Once again, It’s most common on the rear hooves. A higher percent may show lost tail switches. The tail loss may not occur until fly season arrives. It’s not uncommon for you to be working cattle and need to grab the tail and twist it and the lower portion breaks off in your hand. More commonly you’ll just find the tail switch in the pasture.

It appears cattle carrying Brahman genetics are more likely lose tail switches. There are some other points of interest related to genetics and environment. Close observation of fescue foot problems over the years indicate it occurs more on cattle that are newly introduced to the high ergovaline fescue. For example, you may have brought cattle to fescue country from bermuda grass country like Texas or Oklahoma. Those cattle take a while to adapt and if our conditions are just right, you’re more likely to have a wreck with them. The toxin not only knocks hooves off, it drastically affects conception rates.

Cattle from the north, west or even the east, where fescue isn’t the main forage, require caution if you buy them to put on “toxic” fescue. The best practice is to buy cattle that have been on pasture conditions like they’ll find on your farm. If you’re buying semen for artificial insemination purposes, it’s nice to know if that bull’s progeny perform well under “hot” fescue conditions. More and more people seem to have that kind of knowledge if you work on it.

LIVING WITH FESCUE

I hope the first item in this letter gets you to thinking. Many of you have had cattle on fescue all your life with none of the foot problems I’ve described. That’s what causes the bewilderment because it isn’t very predictable, especially when it’s severe and hooves and the animal are lost. Most of you feel you can do a few things like dilute your stand of fescue with legumes, feed non-toxin bearing hay, feed some concentrate, select replacements that seem
to handle fescue in both heat and cold and live with “hot” fescue.

I suspect the majority will try to live with it. A good Greene county cattleman told me when I first came to Mt. Vernon that he’d rather try to live with fescue than to live without it. Another saying, attributed to a University of Missouri extension person years ago was “the grass you’ve got that’s not so good is a whole lot better than the good grass you ain’t got.” Fescue is liked because it’s durable. The endophyte we call the bad toxin-producer gives fescue much of that durability against stresses like insects, disease, drought and overgrazing.

After many years of research we do have alternatives to the bad toxin producer. The novel or friendly endophyte gives the fescue some of the stressor fighting ability without the risk of the negative side effects mentioned earlier. The novel endophyte fescue has been around long enough that it seems to tolerate our conditions and management pretty well. If you’re planning to renovate your pastures in the coming year or so check out the novel, friendly endophyte varieties. There are several to choose from.

I hope you don’t have fescue foot show up in your pastures. If you suspect it, remove the affected cattle from the pasture immediately. If you’re turning cattle in a new fescue pasture be watchful for a few days. Fescue foot symptoms tend to show up in 3 to 5 days if it’s going to occur.

The cattle that may be most sensitive to the toxin are those that have not been eating “hot” fescue. A farmer last year had his cattle on a novel fescue pasture system until in November. At that time they were put on a rented pasture that was “hot” and 3 or 4 head out of 70 or 80 mature cows developed severe symptoms in just 4 or 5 days. Some had to be sacrificed as hooves were lost.

If you are unlucky and have a fescue foot outbreak, I’d appreciate being notified about it. I’ve learned a lot about the problem from both researchers and cattle farmers. Remember, it can and does happen to the best farmers and there is no simple solution to it.

MOVING BRED ANIMALS
I’ve had a few questions about the safe period to haul heifers and cows without hurting their pregnancy rate. Dr. Mike Smith, University of Missouri, reproductive physiologist made some helpful comments about this at the beef repro conference in Joplin in the fall. Here are some of his statements:

- Pregnancy losses before day 42 after breeding are called embryonic loss and range from 20 to 44%.
- Pregnancy losses after day 42 are called fetal losses and amount to about 4% in beef females.

- Embryonic/fetal losses may be due to genetic abnormalities, fescue toxicosis, other plant toxins, excess protein, heat stress, reproductive disease, handling or shipping stress.
- Transporting cattle on a trailer decreased preg rates by about 10% when done between days 5 and 42. The loss was about 6% between days 45 and 60.
- The best time to ship cattle is within 4 days of the fixed-time AI date.

STRAW FOR ROUGHAGE
If your hay supply is running low, you might consider using some wheat straw. It will be low in protein and energy, but properly supplemented with decent hay and a concentrate supplement it might help stretch your hay. Most of the recommendations say to include about 50% wheat straw in the roughage portion.

The values on straw run under 5% crude protein and the lower 40% range on total digestible nutrients (TDN). Granted, it’s not alfalfa, but it could help get you through a tough time. Wheat straw, like fescue stubble hay, can be treated with anhydrous ammonia and the feeding value will be improved. However, treatment is best done in warm weather so I’d not encourage any treating at this time.

BALAGE POINTS
Mike Collins, University of Missouri agronomy professor and interim superintendent at the Southwest Center made some good points earlier this month about using high moisture hay (balage) at our Lawrence County Soils & Crops Conference.

- The ideal moisture level is 45 to 65% for making balage.
- Use at least 4 thicknesses of wrap for individual wrapping.
- The inline system uses about ½ the plastic of individual wrapped bales.
- Make the bale as dense as possible to exclude air and improve fermentation.
- Lay down only as much hay one day as you’ll be able to wrap the next.
- Wrap the bale with plastic twine, untreated sisle twine or netwrap.
- Patch holes promptly with a special tape, not duct tape.
- Innoculents are not required to make quality balage.

CATTLE THEFT
In the last month or so we’ve had a few cattle thefts in the region. Keep your guard up. Consider branding. Count your cattle regularly. If some are missing report it promptly to the county sheriff’s office.