

Doctors' Orders

Veterinarians give herd health advice, stress importance of building a relationship with a vet.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

Veterinarians are getting scarce, especially those willing to come out to your place and look at cattle. But, three veterinarians involved in the Hereford industry say the key to healthy, profitable cattle is having a good veterinarian and developing a relationship with him or her.

L.W. Beckley owns Beckley Herefords and works mainly as a large animal veterinarian, specializing in beef cattle reproductive services. He works with a lot of seedstock operators focused on producing top quality, disease-free breeding stock for a premium. But, he also does general vet work for cow-calf producers, stockers and others.



Beckley says the four main components of a good animal health program are vaccinations, nutrition, deworming and disease screening.

Prevention is key

"First you've got to have a good vaccination protocol," Beckley says. "Ask your vet about your area, because there will be differences in some vaccines and some are more important than others, depending on where you're at."

He adds, "Prevention is key to a successful operation. Cattle just do so much better if they never get sick."

Mike McDonald, who is a Hereford breeder and veterinarian in West Virginia,

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echoes Beckley's thoughts on the importance of vaccination. "I think, without question, getting calves vaccinated at a young age greatly decreases the incidence of sickness and respiratory problems later when they are moved or shipped."

McDonald adds that this is an area some purebred breeders may overlook because they are not necessarily backgrounding cattle or preparing them for the feedlot, but that doesn't mean they aren't at risk. "Like at the state fair or when we take cattle to a show and they are exposed to other cattle and shipping and washing, they are put under stress where they should be vaccinated at a young age to protect them."

McDonald also points out that the cost of vaccinations is cheap compared to the cost of treatment. "The cost of vaccines is only about \$5 to \$10 per animal whereas the cost per treatment of some newer drugs runs about \$20," he says.

Commercial cattleman and veterinarian Tom Hill, Baker City, Ore., also stresses the importance of vaccinations. In his operation, he admits vaccinating more than most because his calves are sold as Country Natural Beef, and so treating one for sickness makes it ineligible for the program.

Hill says, "We stay on top of our vaccinations, particularly our viral vaccines for respiratory disease so they don't get sick in the feedlot. We also give



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The good doctors

These veterinarians practice what they preach. All involved in the Hereford industry in one way or another, their knowledge of animal health comes from book learning and hands-on experience. And as a credit to the breed, after looking at beef cattle most of the day, they choose Herefords to come home to.

L.W. Beckley, Irvine, Ky., graduated from Auburn University vet school in 2000. After working at two other vet clinics, he was glad to return to his hometown and start his own practice. He mostly works out of his pickup, traveling to area farms. "I enjoy working for myself and working outside," he says.

In addition to his busy vet schedule, he raises Herefords along with his father. They each have about 50 cows of which most are registered. They enjoy a good commercial bull market as well as selling a few top end bulls to other registered breeders. They also market through consignment sales.

Beckley shows some home-raised cattle. "We go to the Kentucky State Fair, the North American, Keystone and, occasionally, Denver," he says. In 2006 he won the cow-calf division at the North American International Livestock Exposition with Beckley Kaeyla 799P and her calf Beckley Ontime 9345. "That really meant a lot to us because we raised the cow and the calf," Beckley says.

"The big thing I want to do is produce functional cows that will go into the showing and compete and we can have fun with, but go back and make it on grass," Beckley says. And he adds Herefords work well for that because their good disposition makes them easy to show, plus they're an easy fleshing, low maintenance type of cattle when they're ready to return to the herd.

Mike McDonald, Jane Lew, W.Va., attended veterinary school at The Ohio State University and graduated in 1984. He works as a mixed animal veterinarian in what he calls "semi-rural" West Virginia. Much of his time is spent working with beef cattle, though.



L.W. Beckley (above) and Mike McDonald (right) escape the stress of veterinary work to show their home-raised Herefords.



He has a Hereford herd of about 60 purebreds and 35 commercial cows. He keeps the purebred heifers but steers all the bull calves for feeders. He markets the top end of his feeder steers at the Greater Midwest Certified Hereford Calf Sale in Carthage, Ill. He has participated in the sale since it was started and says he has enjoyed a premium for his Herefords every year, compared to what they would have brought at a local sale barn.

McDonald also buys about 100-200 crossbred feeder calves in similar weight groups to add to his remaining home-raised calves. He turns them out on grass and grows them to about 750 lb., and then either sells them or feeds them out at a feedlot in Nebraska. "I

don't have a big enough farm to make whole potloads of my own, so I will buy enough other feeders to make a whole group to background and sell or feed," he explains.

Before he started consigning to the Hereford feeder calf sale, he marketed his own calves through the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) program. Now, he doesn't keep enough Herefords to make it work. "I buy all colors to put with mine to make a load, but I would like to buy more quality Herefords that would fit the CHB program."

He says he prefers showing Herefords because of their temperament, but other qualities make them the best choice to feed. "I think they are more disease-resistant, because I have less problems with sickness outbreaks on the Herefords I feed," McDonald says, adding, "They also feed efficiently."

Tom Hill, Baker City, Ore., has been a veterinarian for 34 years. He graduated from Colorado State University's vet school and then returned to his home state of Oregon to practice. He and his wife, Lynn, along with the help of their two grown children and their spouses, run commercial cows. "Lynn's the manger," Tom says. "She's in charge."

everything an 8-way because of our area and vaccinate for pinkeye and foot rot. Most of that is just because it costs us a lot of money if we treat one and they are out of the program.”

Nutrition is also critical to a successful health program. In fact, Hill says nutrition is arguably the most important part. “Whether we are talking about supplementing energy or protein or whatever, nutrition is the main thing we deal with especially through the winter.”

Beckley agrees, saying nutrition is often overlooked in regard to animal health. “Even if they’ve got the best vaccination program in the world, if they don’t feed a good trace mineral, the immune system can’t function properly without everything in balance nutritionally.”

Parasite control is another necessary component to a healthy herd. McDonald says controlling worms in the cow herd and for stocker and feedlot cattle is essential to efficient reproduction and growth. And, parasite control varies greatly depending on the environment in which the cattle are kept, so it’s important to get your vet’s input on what to use and when to deworm.

Lastly, utilizing screening tests can be beneficial to cattlemen, especially for seedstock operators, says Beckley. “Producers should consider screening-type tests for anything that could be a great economical problem. Especially in the seedstock business, people want to buy cattle that they know aren’t introducing anything into their herd.

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Yearly screening to make sure your herd is clean may be a good idea.”

Don’t cut health

All three vets agree that your animal health program is not the place to cut back no matter how tight budgets get. Beckley says, “It’s a lot harder to make money on an animal that has gotten sick or has problems or one that you’ve culled due to sickness. You can’t make a profit on a dead one. My cow herd has to pay for itself, and you can look at some places to cut corners, but animal health isn’t one of them.”

The bottom line is to establish a good working relationship, and even friendship, with your veterinarian to the benefit of both parties. Hill says, “I think just having a relationship with a vet so they have an opportunity to get to know your operation is important. Everything varies a lot with how people are running cattle and what they are doing with them. It sure helps to get an ongoing relationship with a vet so they are a lot better able to advise you on things that help your program.”

It’s important to remember, too, that veterinarians are trying to make a living as well, and it’s not always easy. No better proof of this difficulty is the shortage of large animal and rural veterinarians. So, if you expect your veterinarian to jump out of bed in the middle of the night and rush to your aid, you might not want to pinch pennies and buy your vaccines and other animal health products from the feed store.

Including your vet in yearly and seasonal health care decisions is to your advantage too, Beckley says. “You need to keep a relationship with your vet, and if they’re involved in some of your routine stuff, they can better advise you on problems that you are having. And they know what you deal with on a regular basis. Large animal vets are getting harder to find, so if you want to keep them around, then you need to help support their business.” **HW**



Tom and his wife, Lynn, prefer to cross Hereford and Angus to produce calves that will look good on the rail and as replacements.

They calve about 225 cows every year, of which nearly all are black baldies. “We try to keep a whiteface and black hide on all our replacements,” Hill says. To do that, he uses Hereford bulls from Harrell Hereford Ranch along with Angus bulls.

They market their calves as beef through the Country Natural Beef (CNB) program. “We wean the calves here and keep them on grass for a month and a half or so, and in about November we will send them to a backgrounding lot, and then they will go to a feedlot from there,” Hill says. Ownership is retained through the production chain to the rail.

Hill says they buy Harrell Hereford bulls because Bob Harrell and his family know how the CNB program works and they are selecting genetics that work specifically for the program. In order to be eligible, the calves can’t be given antibiotics or ionophores and must meet carcass requirements. “We want a big ribeye, moderate backfat and around a 700 lb. carcass,” Hill says.

The Hills prefer a black baldie cow because she will winter reasonably and run efficiently year-round. Plus, Hill says, “I have a full-time day job, so we need cattle that can take care of themselves, and they are, because we don’t spend much time with them and they still work good for us.” **HW**