



Building a Herd Health Plan

Working with a veterinarian on herd health strategies can pay off big for producers.

by *Heather Smith Thomas*

It is always beneficial for producers to have a good working relationship with their veterinarian, who can assist with herd health management strategies and preventative medicine rather than only emergencies. A veterinarian can answer questions to help prevent problems, yet many cattlemen still tend to have a narrow perspective of what their veterinarian can offer.

Problem solving is key

Dean Lusk, a veterinarian in Jerome, Idaho, who has an extensive cattle practice, says consultations often save a producer time and money by improving herd health.

“In our practice we have seen many different problems and have helped producers resolve them,” he explains. “A few years ago, one client’s herd had calves with rickets. The cattle were on desert range in Nevada and that year it was extremely dry; the cattle were on dry grass all summer. The calves that came off that range and went into a feedlot were lighter than normal, and when they hit that good feed and started gaining weight swiftly, they started breaking bones.”

Lusk was tasked with a pen of calves that had 20 broken femurs. The rancher was at a loss when determining what the problem could be. In the end Lusk says they had a vitamin D deficiency. Every time his client worked those calves they would have fractures because their bones were so fragile. Without enough vitamin D the calcium and phosphorus were not being put down correctly as they grew. Then when those calves started growing quickly, adding more weight to a fragile skeletal frame, their bones didn’t have enough structural strength.

After the source of the problem was found, Lusk was able to inject the calves with vitamin D. Within two weeks they started improving bone strength, and within six weeks there was a dramatic change in their bones – they didn’t break any more legs.

“Just knowing the physiology and pathophysiology behind rickets and the vitamin D, calcium and phosphorus interactions allowed us to make changes in management for that rancher,” he explains. “On dry years, when we preg-check those cows, we now give them an injection of vitamin D, and when they calve in the spring we give the calves vitamin D.”

Their treatment resolved the problem for the producer, and he became proactive to avoid this problem again in dry years. “If he hadn’t had a way to find out what he was dealing with or how to resolve it, or how to get the resources to help with it, this could have been a problem that repeated year after year,” Lusk notes. “Working with a veterinarian can make a big difference on the outcome.”

Preventing disease

David Van Metre, associate professor and Extension veterinarian at Colorado State University, says many cattle diseases are more successfully prevented than treated. “If a serious health problem develops in a herd, something has already gone wrong,” he explains. “Most veterinarians can serve as an important resource for helping clients figure out why certain diseases show up, and how management and environment can be changed to help prevent disease.” Other ways veterinarians can be utilized in





Inviting a veterinarian out during vaccination time can provide an extra set of eyes to evaluate herd health.

cow-calf operations include designing herd health programs like vaccination, deworming strategies and treatment protocols to ensure appropriate medications are used for specific problems.

John Hall, Extension beef specialist, University of Idaho, tells ranchers there are several advantages to having their veterinarian as a consultant. “This gives the veterinarian a chance to help the producer look over the entire operation in terms of herd health,” he says. “Together they can find weak areas, and identify places for improvement.”

The veterinarian may suggest changes and perhaps help the producer get connected with other professionals — a nutritionist, an Extension agent or someone from the Natural Resources Conservation Service if there’s a water problem. Every operation is different, so there may be unique factors to address. It also helps if the rancher and veterinarian can work with a nutritionist regarding the overall health program. Nutrition affects everything else — such as fertility and the immune system.

Hall advises ranchers to sit down with their veterinarian once or twice a year to discuss any problems experienced that year or to ask questions about new vaccines. “There’s not much difference in most vaccines, but cattlemen need to make sure they are using a vaccine that matches their management, production or health maintenance program,” he notes.

By having the veterinarian as a consultant, a cattle producer can stay ahead of the game if there’s a change in vaccines or dewormers. “The veterinarian could talk about the most cost-

effective and rational strategy for treating certain diseases, including the common things like retained placenta, mastitis, or foot rot,” Van Metre says.

The producer may manage cattle in a certain way each year with no problems until something changes. Environmental factors like the weather, more heifers calving and more cattle congregating in the late winter can result in health outbreaks a rancher has not seen before.

Management plan

Herd health management must be a strategic plan, reevaluated every year. It’s a moving target. Producers should visit with their veterinarian to find out about new things available and what might be useful in the operation. The switch may also result in saving dollars in the end.

It is also important to remember a neighbor’s success rate on a health program is not always indicative of how it will react with other herds. A veterinarian can often answer questions to shed light on a broader picture; every ranch is facing different challenges.

For instance, there are more than 400 licensed vaccine products, and it can be challenging to know what to choose. They all work, but some may target different approaches. Discussing the options with a veterinarian, considering herd history and current management, is vital to discovering the best program per herd.

A biosecurity program can also be a topic of interest. Looking at sources for new cattle and the importance of keeping purchased animals separate from the main herd until the producer knows they are free of disease is critical. Even if a producer is doing everything possible to ensure good herd health, a challenge can arise if someone in the grazing association or across the fence is doing the minimum. Ranchers should make a conscious effort to understand some of the diseases that could possibly be brought into a herd, and know the risks. A little money spent on consultation with a veterinarian might prevent a big wreck down the road.

Mark Bramwell, DVM, at South Fork Veterinary Clinic in Rigby, Idaho, says a good relationship with a veterinarian can help a producer be more successful. “At producer meetings we provide information on ways ranchers can improve their management and be more successful in aspects that will be helpful in their business,” he explains. “We talk about minerals and the huge health benefits for cattle that are not mineral-deficient. In our region, we have severe mineral deficiencies, particularly copper and selenium.”

It is not uncommon for Bramwell’s office to reach out to ranchers to offer time to perform a consultation. At the end of the day the veterinarians want the producer to be as successful as possible under their care.

“It all comes down to trust,” Bramwell explains. “We also try to keep prices on our medications competitive, so ranchers will come in to buy vaccines or antibiotics, and sometimes they ask to talk to a veterinarian so we can chat with them then.” This contact opens

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the door to some consultations, and the veterinarian can do more than just sell the product.

Hall says the veterinarian has to make a living, just like everyone else. "One way to do that is to charge a high fee every time the rancher has an emergency," he explains. "The other way is by helping the rancher increase profit margin by charging a fee for expertise in certain areas – and possibly prevent those catastrophes. If the rancher can save three more calves, or get three more cows bred, he/she can afford that consultation. Putting the veterinarian into a partnership role can pay off for the producer."

It's harder to become educated about health issues when the only opportunity to talk with a veterinarian is during an emergency. It's hard for a veterinarian to concentrate on anything else other than dealing with that particular emergency. "During times of year when things are a little slow for both of you, you could get together and look over things," Hall says. This time provides an opportunity to look at what kinds of problems arose last year and what things can be done differently.

Some topics may include calving rate, length of calving season and phenotype of born calves. The vet is probably more objective, looking at body condition, to help a client evaluate the herd. A growing number of veterinarians are helping clients with records and recordkeeping systems. All of these add up to a chance to fine-tune the health management of the operation, resulting in fewer losses and more profit for the rancher.

Van Metre stresses the need for veterinarians to explain and demonstrate health care procedures and diagnostics. "The vast majority of ranchers want to do a good job; they want to raise healthy animals and are willing to learn," he notes. "Our side of

the obligation is to have the capacity to teach. The opportunity to teach is a two-way street; the rancher must be willing to learn, and the veterinarian must be willing to listen and learn as well. For example, some of the best tips on helping heifers with dystocia I learned from a rancher."

Most ranchers work with their veterinarian on common task-based things such as pregnancy diagnosis, but there is much to be gained by also working together on sound, scientifically valid disease prevention strategies.

Another set of eyes

"If clients trust us, they'll have us out to do their Bangs vaccinations and preg-checking, and then we may also be able to do some liver biopsies to check selenium and copper status," Bramwell says. "If the rancher has an outbreak of disease he or she is more likely to call us to try to figure it out and maybe do some necropsy work and diagnostics."

If the veterinarian is there pregnancy-checking, he or she is an extra set of eyes to assess herd health issues – to suspect a copper deficiency or some other situation the client needs to be aware of. The veterinarian can also check teeth, eyes, body condition scores, etc. and not only suggest things that might help the producer deal with situations at hand, but also give input that might help in future management decisions.

Hall tells ranchers it's good to get someone else to look at their cattle. "When you are looking at your own operation every day, you become accustomed to how things look and might not notice something an impartial observer might see. If the vet is out there periodically and familiar with the farm or ranch, he or she may be able to see changes more readily," Hall says.

When veterinarians only get to see sick animals, they only see what has gone wrong. By seeing a sick calf in the clinic, they can only deduce what's wrong with it and which pathogens are making it sick. Veterinarians can't always tell the producer why something happened until they get out on the place. Hall says that knowing why things happen on a ranch is key to helping prevent future problems.

"Many ranchers simply look at the check they have to write for pregnancy testing and avoid calling the veterinarian any other time unless it's an emergency. But we want them to know that if they see a problem or have a question they could just make a phone call or have the veterinarian out now and then to walk through things and talk about preventative management," Hall explains. "There is so much that can be gleaned from just having someone looking at things from a different perspective as we walk through a pen and look at the animals."

"We can look at body condition, hair coat health and color, eyes, and more," Lusk says. "We can talk about parasites, minerals, water sources and feed. We can help head off scour outbreaks or pneumonia, with advance consultation and advice to producers so they can make some management changes."

Some clients may benefit from learning about proper calf-pulling techniques or how to get a compromised calf breathing or how to provide colostrum to newborns that are unable to suckle. Some producers are proactive in their efforts to prevent illness in young calves and want to do all they can to minimize risk. They may want to learn better treatment techniques for the ones that do get sick or how to give IV fluids to a calf.

"If they want to learn how to pull calves better, or give IVs, we are happy to help them," Lusk notes. "Some veterinarians are afraid that if their clients learn how to take care of the animals and do these things it will cut down on their work, but our philosophy is just the opposite. We find that the more we teach clients, the more work we have."

The educated client realizes the benefits of working with a veterinarian and values that relationship. He says these clients know that they are benefiting from this additional knowledge and that their cattle are healthier and more productive because they are doing a better job with their cows. He notices those producers often consult veterinarians more often for advice or to ask a question, rather than waiting until an emergency before they call. Good relationships with clients prompt problem solving, even across a simple phone call.

"I have several clients that I have enough confidence in that I can tell them over the phone what to do to resolve something, or I can tell them it's something we are seeing in herds this year, or struggling with on another farm," he explains. "I can give suggestions for what to try or what to look for and have the rancher call me back and let me know." **HW**



A veterinarian as an information filter

David Van Metre, associate professor and Extension veterinarian at Colorado State University, says making sensible and cost-effective treatment protocols not only helps minimize treatment costs and maximize treatment success but also can be important in quality assurance and residue avoidance.

Some stockmen have other businesses outside of their cattle operation. The last data Van Metre saw revealed only about one in seven U.S. cow-calf operations has cattle as its primary source of income. Most of the cattle in the U.S. are produced by people with herds of 50 cows or fewer.

"Typically those stockmen have other jobs and raise cattle on the side," he explains. "It can be hard for a rancher to wade through all the data regarding efficacy of certain vaccines, the proper utilization of vaccine or deworming drugs, the appropriate antibiotics to use for different respiratory conditions in different animals. The primary source of exposure to many products comes from advertising in lay journals and those won't always show the data that would give a chance to compare claims to efficacy. This is where veterinarians can offer expertise; we are trained in how to critically evaluate scientific literature and can help clients determine whether or not a particular product has been proven useful in the scenarios they will face."

The veterinarian can be an information filter to help make sense of it all. He or she has access to scientific publications that can prove or disprove the utility of a certain animal health product in a particular setting. If cattle are scattered in large pastures in a northern climate, the need for parasite control is much different from that for intensively pastured cattle in Alabama, for instance.

"One of our responsibilities is to stay on top of new product developments, and to ask the important questions that a producer needs answered, in order to make the right decisions about which product to use. Product scrutiny and validation of efficacy claims for different products is part of our job," Van Metre says. **HW**