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# Approaches to Herd Health

**Don't let habits creep into your diagnosis of herd health issues.**

by Troy Smith

“Sometimes we need to look deeper and think harder,” suggests George Faris. In practice for 39 years, the Wheatland, Wyo., veterinarian fears some producers address their herd health problems only superficially.

It's not intentional. Faris believes a great majority of producers believe they are doing all they can to keep their stock from becoming sick. All too often, it happens anyway. It happens even though these producers may be spending lots of time and plenty of money to detect illness and render treatment with highly recommended remedies. But animals sometimes contract disease, despite producer efforts to immunize herds through vaccination.

## **Re-evaluate management practices**

Often, animal disease is a consequence of multiple contributing events and

conditions. It isn't just about the bug — some infectious disease agent. It's also about the relative risk of exposure to the bug and an animal's susceptibility to infection. These things are influenced by environmental factors, some of which may be beyond a producer's control. Others are manageable.

To illustrate the point, Faris tells about an un-named cattle feeder operating in a neighboring state. It seems this particular feedyard manager routinely received calves that had been hauled hundreds of miles. Typically, newly arrived calves were assigned to one of the feedyard's “front pens” located near the mill and office. Placement in these pens, at the very hub of operations, made it easy for the manager and his employees to observe the calves multiple times each day. Sickness could be detected and treated quickly. And there was sickness.

“Those receiving pens were close to all kinds of activity, feed

trucks and lots of other traffic coming and going all day long. It was dusty and noisy,” explains Faris. “So, was that the best place for highly stressed, just-arrived cattle? Under those conditions, will new cattle acclimate quickly, or are they even more likely to get sick?”

Unfortunately, producers don't always recognize that management choices can have unintended consequences. In this case, Faris' feeder-friend penned new arrivals where sickness could be addressed most easily. The trade-off was a higher incidence of sickness.

“You've got to do what's right for the cattle; not just what's most convenient,” warns Faris, reminding producers that managing animal health really starts with balanced nutrition. When health problems persist, it's an area of management that should be prioritized for scrutiny. But don't think singularly. Scrutinize the whole production system, looking for decisions or

practices that may have delivered a sought-after result accompanied by an unexpected and previously unrecognized result.

Veterinarian Dan Goehl, of Canton, Mo., agrees that producers sometimes fail to fully consider the potential down-side of some management decisions. In a way, the availability of a broad arsenal of animal health products may be a contributing factor. Goehl thinks there is a very real danger of producers becoming too reliant on them.

“This is absolutely true,” he affirms. “It's just human nature to take the path of least resistance. Unfortunately, producers sometimes think this path can be found through a needle.”

Goehl believes most producers realize that antibiotic treatments address symptoms of sickness and not the cause. They may employ vaccination as a preventive measure, but that too may be only a short-term fix — if the management system creates an environment where disease challenges are overwhelming. As difficult as it may be to admit, producers may be driving some of the animal health problems they face.

“As a veterinarian, it can be difficult to work through these problems with producers. Often, they are looking for a silver bullet when there isn't one. As with most everything in life, it is an accumulation of small things. But that can make it hard to convince a client that what is really needed is a management change,” Goehl states.

## **Small steps with big improvements**

Sometimes, relatively simple changes can lead to real and lasting improvement. For example, Goehl discourages the common practice of buying baby calves at a sale barn, to foster on cows that have lost their own calves. Calling it one of his “pet peeves,” Goehl says bringing those calves into the herd also brings a high risk of exposure to many kinds of disease pathogens. He has seen what can happen following such a blatant breach of biosecurity.

“It's not worth the risk. Just sell those cows or run them over as dries,” he advises.

Goehl says a biosecurity plan also should be a priority for stocker operations which handle high-risk calves. He recommends biocontainment of newly acquired animals, keeping them separate for a period of time to prevent the potential spread of disease. Goehl also recommends consideration of the type and timing of processing protocols.

“Understand that not all stocker cattle are created equal,” Goehl warns. “How I receive a 45-day weaned and preconditioned calf has no bearing on how I receive a long-hauled, un-weaned bull.”

According to University of Nebraska Veterinary Epidemiologist and Extension Specialist Brian Vander Ley, cattle producers representing all industry segments and all geographic regions often find comfort in traditions they have inherited or created for themselves. Defining their own particular production systems as “what works for us,” they typically stick to the well-trod path. They don’t go looking for ways to change when, where or how they perform fundamental practices, such as calving, weaning, shipping or receiving of cattle. Sometimes, however, a lasting solution to animal health problems requires significant change.

Vander Ley talks about one family-run cow-calf operation’s running battle with calf scours. Never a big problem previously, scours became increasingly serious after the family started expanding its cow herd, in order to bring a now-grown child into the operation. Cow numbers increased a little more each year and the incidence and severity of scours also increased.

“They had incredible scour problems, moving from single- to double-digit mortality rates,” tells Vander Ley. “They spent a lot of money on treatments for sick calves and then started vaccinating cows to prevent scours. The next year, it was the same thing — a lot of sick calves, a lot of dead calves — and these people wondered why the vaccination program wasn’t working.”

Vander Ley says he has seen other examples like this one, where vaccination became another treatment of disease symptoms rather than a way to fix the real problem. And the real problem was year-after-year use of the same traditional “calving pasture” and an increasingly larger number of brood cows calving within the same land area used when the herd was smaller. From a calf health standpoint, the calving grounds had become overcrowded. The opportunity for exposure to scour-causing agents was high and, for many calves, overwhelming.

“The long-term fix for scours is to manage exposure. I doubt we’ll ever completely eliminate calf scours, but we can mitigate it by managing exposure,” states Vander Ley, noting that the Sandhills Calving System might

be a fitting mitigation method for operations like the one described.

According to that management procedure, periodically (at least every two weeks) during the course of the calving season, cows yet to calve are separated from those that have delivered and moved to a separate, previously unoccupied pasture. The objective is to have calves born on relatively clean ground and protect newborns from exposure to pathogens shed by older calves. As successful as the Sandhills Calving System can be, Faris acknowledges that it may not fit every operation. In such cases, he suggests that an old-fashioned alternative be considered.

“When I was growing up, we were out there horseback pairing out just about every day. It’s another way to spread those calves out and reduce exposure,” says Faris, describing the practice of removing pairs from the calving pasture, as soon as young calves can travel well enough. “But some people use the same calving pasture for generations and keep cattle in close quarters for too long, and then they’re really busy treating sick calves.”

Vander Ley fears the cattle industry, in general, may have become better at treating disease than preventing it. Prevention, to many producers, equates with a vaccination program. If they vaccinate, they think they are doing the best that they can do. But Vander Ley believes there is a very real danger of becoming too dependent upon the hypodermic needle. He believes it can lead to

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— Brian Vander Ley

a kind of complacency. Instead, he urges producers to look harder for the reasons why their cattle could get sick.

“So many operations are wide open to biological risk, because of their structural components and interactions, and maybe their traditions,” says Vander Ley. “Combinations of circumstances and events drive (animal health) problems. Too often, though, producers just treat the symptoms without ever finding the root-cause.”

Warning against a “best management practices” mentality, Vander Ley admits that the veterinary profession has been guilty of promoting it to some degree. Producers have been told that doing this, this and this is likely to deliver the best results possible, or the fewest problems at least. However, Vander Ley emphasizes that different operations have different problems — different levels of risk relating to different kinds of disease. The practices that are best for one operation may not be best for another.

#### Seek additional advice

Vander Ley urges producers to look inward with a disciplined systems approach. The parts and pieces of an operation affect the whole. Consider the various elements of the production system

structure to identify unintended consequences. Consider how the operation’s structure could be driving health problems.

Vander Ley also recommends that producers consult their veterinarians for help in assessing and prioritizing biological threats. A veterinarian can help gain understanding of specific diseases, their methods of transmission and likely control points within a producer’s own operation. Then consider what structural changes will address the real cause of disease.

“Typically, the deeper within the structure that changes are made, the more leverage we have for solving a problem,” states Vander Ley.

To some extent, all human beings are creatures of habit. Routines and time-worn ways of operating become comfortable. There are times, however, when sticking with the status quo carries the greatest risk. If disease problems persist, despite liberal use of the needle, some change in management practices or procedures might be the remedy. Vander Ley suggests that producers remember the definition of insanity. You can’t keep doing the same thing, over and over again, and expect different results. **HW**

