

Cattle escaping fire death may have secondary injuries

AgriLife Extension: Consult veterinarian to identify other problems

April 14, 2009

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COLLEGE STATION – Analyzing injuries to cattle following a wildfire is important to minimize losses, said Texas AgriLife Extension Service specialists.

"It might look like they've made it and there was no visible physical damage," said Dr. Floron "Buddy" Faries, AgriLife Extension program leader for veterinary medicine. "However, it's important to have them looked at by a veterinarian as soon as possible because there could be secondary problems that lead to infections and further problems."

Health disorders such as burned eyes, feet, udders, sheaths and testicles, as well as smoke inhalation with lung inflammation and edema, are the most common problems, Faries said.

Wildfires have ripped across thousands of acres of ranchland, trapping cattle and causing injuries, and in some cases death, said Ron Gill, associate department head for animal science and AgriLife Extension livestock specialist in College Station.

In one single wildfire area, producers have lost more than 100 head of cattle. Other producers are reporting secondary problems, such as scorched or burned cattle.

"One of the immediate problems that has to be dealt with within two or three days is damage to the feet and the coronary band above the hoof," Gill said. "It may take 10 days to two weeks for the damage to start showing. The cattle will start sloughing the hoof wall and develop secondary infections and become lame and unable or unwilling to stand."

The main thing AgriLife Extension is working on with veterinarians is what symptoms to look for and what actions to take if lameness begins to appear, Gill said.

Another major concern is for lactating cows and the potential to develop mastitis, he said. Damage to teats and udders will prevent calves from nursing. Calves that survived the fire have a higher risk of becoming "dogie" calves due to the inability to nurse or the loss of their dam.

The fires came at a very inopportune time for ranchers who are beginning the calving season, said Dr. Ted McCollum, AgriLife Extension livestock specialist in Amarillo.

"We probably had a lot of calves that were laying out susceptible to the fire, as fast as it was moving across there," McCollum said. "They had no place to go. Also there will be a lot of mothers with potentially scorched udders. The calves that survived won't be able to suckle the mothers who have sore udders."

"Producers should be looking for bawling calves to provide replacement milk or to sell to someone who can care for these calves," said Gill.

A veterinarian should be consulted to see if the animal can be treated, Faries said. If not, decisions concerning sending them to market need to be made immediately before secondary complications develop.

"Cattle that have an elevated temperature due to secondary infections or cannot stand or walk cannot be salvaged for slaughter," Gill said. "If a veterinarian has determined that the prognosis for recovery is poor, the animal should be humanely euthanized and the carcass properly disposed of."

Faries said animals that were not evacuated and remained in a fire danger zone, even if only for a short time, could suffer injuries. A fire-danger zone is the area where the livestock risk inhaling smoke, and changes according to the wind direction. Smoke can move for miles, and cattle that are not near the flames or heat could suffer some injury.

Contact with burning grass, weeds and brush causes immediate burns; however, inhalation of smoke causes immediate irritation to the lining of the respiratory system, including nasal passages, trachea and lungs, Faries said. This can lead to inflammation, edema and emphysema, with the severity determined by the duration of inhaled smoke.

"The time it takes to cause damage might only have to be a few minutes with high quantities of smoke and may be hours in low quantities of smoke," he said. In addition, the lining of the eyelids and eyeballs can be irritated and lead to secondary infections causing additional illness or even death, Faries said.

Once the fire has passed, a veterinarian should be consulted immediately for any animals with severe burns or direct smoke exposure. Other livestock should also be evaluated for possible health disorders and treatment or determining if the animal can be salvaged for slaughter or should be euthanized, he said.

The prognosis for mild cases may be good with treatment and will be cost-effective, Faries said.

Monitoring should continue for weeks after the event, he said, because of the secondary complications that could be indicated by a cough or cloudy eyes in the animals.

"Before these secondary complications of infection occur, immediate slaughter for human consumption may be the most appropriate, humane procedure," Faries said. "Prior to slaughter, an antemortem inspection will be conducted by veterinary meat inspectors to determine safety and wholesomeness for human food." -30-