Common Lameness Issues of Cattle on Pasture

While performing routine checks of cattle on pasture, often times bulls, cows or calves are identified as having a lameness issue. Often times these issues may resolve on their own, but in the mean time lameness can have a significant impact on animal fertility, weight gain and overall performance. Furthermore, that animal may become a financial burden when it comes to increased labor and medicine costs to treat the issue. According to Dr. A.J. Tarpoff, extension beef veterinarian in a KSU Beef Tips article, 88-92% of lameness in cattle is estimated to come from the foot. This article will discuss some of the common culprits for cattle lameness and their clinical signs. As always, producers should consult with their veterinarians for diagnosis and treatment of such health concerns.

The first step to identifying and diagnosing a lameness issue is to observe the affected limb for any swelling. Obvious swelling can reveal necessary information about the injury. For example, the location and symmetry of the swelling can help pinpoint the cause. According to Dr. Tarpoff, the swelling most commonly can be found in the lower limb. He also suggests determining if the swelling is equal on both sides of leg, if it’s more on one side than the other, or if it is concentrated around a joint may lead to a proper diagnosis. Moving forward these observations may help us distinguish if the lameness is due to a physical injury or infection.

Footrot, a common disease from a bacterial infection is a solid first consideration for lameness. With this disease, typically asymmetric swelling in the lower limb just above the hoof can be observed. If able to get a closer look, you may see a crack in the skin between the toes of the hoof accompanied by a foul pungent odor. With early diagnosis of footrot, administering an injectable antibiotic can be very successful in treating the disease. However, left untreated or diagnosed late the infection may cause damage to deeper structures of the hoof and foot including tendons, joints and even bones. Delayed treatment often requires more significant interventions and increased cull rates from the herd (Tarpoff, 2020).

Another common ailment in pasture cattle causing lameness includes cattle becoming entangled in wire, bale wrap or other foreign bodies. Often times these sorts of injuries present symmetrical swellings much like footrot and are misdiagnosed as such. One distinguishing characteristic may include a horizontal line across the swelling where the foreign object entered the tissue. If the object is still wrapped around the foot or embedded into the tissue, it needs to be removed (Tarpoff, 2020).

If while checking cattle on pasture an animal is identified as lame with an asymmetric, or uneven swelling it may be an indication of a more serious injury. This type of swelling concentrated to one side of the limb or foot is often a sign of deep structure issues such as a puncture wounds, sole abscesses, or chronic infections (Tarpoff, 2020). These can result in infections of a joint, bone, or tendon with injury concentrated on one side. With this type of lameness issues, a veterinarian and a tilt table working on a sedated animal is typically required for full treatment and the best chances for a positive outcome (Tarpoff, 2020).

When swelling is concentrated around a single or multiple joints, this is often the result of septic arthritis in calves. A bacterial infection in the joints, this disease can result from very young calves contracting naval ill or when bacteria enter the bloodstream. However, it is also possible to see septic arthritis following a respiratory disease with certain pathogens. Generally, more complicated to treat, animals with swollen and septic joints often require several weeks to recover as the inflammation lessens. Older cattle can also suffer from swollen joints, but many times this is the result of bone and joint breakdown and may include the breakdown of hocks in breeding bulls due to riding activity. Again, consultation with a veterinarian is important in the proper diagnosis and treatment of cattle lameness (Tarpoff, 2020).

While swelling can help determine the source of lameness, swelling is not always present. For example, Hairy Heel Warts (also known as Digital Dermatitis or Strawberry Footrot) is a condition not accompanied by swelling. Instead, diagnosis can be achieved by observing the animal attempt to walk on their tippy toe with wart like growths or bright red scabs below the dewclaw and above the heel of the hoof. In this case a topical treatment with an astringent or antibacterial solution is needed for the disease to resolve (Tarpoff, 2020).

Lastly a condition called toe tip necrosis (toe abscesses) is most commonly seen in recently turned-out stocker cattle. These cattle will typically be identified with alternating lameness in the hind limbs. Often, they will stand in awkward positions in an attempt to relieve the weight and pressure off their affected toe. Usually affecting the outside toe, diagnosis includes using hoof testers and treatment requires opening the toe to relieve the pressure (Tarpoff, 2020).

Identifying lameness of cattle on pasture can be difficult without nearby facilities to catch and take a closer look. However, understanding the subtle differences of clinical signs will help lead to the proper diagnosis and treatment. Maintaining a working relationship with a veterinarian may prove useful when lameness issues cannot be resolved by the producer.

For more information, please visit or call the Cheyenne County Extension Office at (785)332-3171.