

Reducing Flies Helps Keep Herds Healthy

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Flies are annual summer pests of cattle and other livestock. Controlling them could mean happier, healthier and heavier livestock.

Horn flies are small flies that feed off the blood of cattle and in rare cases, horses. Young animals are the most susceptible to horn flies, as large numbers of flies feeding on an animal can cause lower weights. Weaning weights of beef calves with an average of 200 or more horn flies during the summer are about 15 pounds less than those that are protected from horn flies. The same type of impact has been seen on yearling cattle. Since the flies spend most of their time on their host, they are an easy target for insecticide treatments, with dust bags and ear tags providing the most consistent control. The goal is to get fly populations lower than 100 flies per animal.

Producers should be aware that some flies, being a recurring nuisance, have developed resistance toward certain insecticides over the years. To prevent horn fly resistance, producers may want to rotate annually the type of chemical they use, only treat cattle with more than 200 flies and those that are 1-year-old or less, and remove ear tags after fly populations begin to decline in the fall.

Face flies are another species that can annoy cattle. Closely resembling a house fly, they feed off moisture from the animal's face, including tears, saliva, blood and mucus. In addition, their bites can make cattle more susceptible to pinkeye.

While not the sole factor in pinkeye outbreaks in herds, the face fly can play an important role. It is a strong flier, and its irritating feeding abrades the eye, which allows it to pick up the pathogen from an infected animal and to transfer it to an uninfected one. Unlike the horn fly, face flies spend little time on an animal, as they jump from one to another until they get sustenance. While elimination of face flies is not a practical goal, it is possible to reduce their numbers.

In some cases, impregnated ear tags have reduced populations by 70 percent. Dust bags and back rubbers with fly flips also allow producers to effectively control flies when placed in areas where the animal has to rub against them to get to food or water.

House and stable flies can be a nuisance for cattle in enclosed areas, such as milking parlors. The key to controlling these insects is having sound sanitation practices in place. Flies are attracted to moist surfaces such as manure, bedding and feed for egg laying. Removing these on a regular basis eliminates breeding sites. If they can't be removed right away, keeping them dry as possible will make them less attractive to flies as breeding sites. Screens or similar barriers can be installed in facilities to keep flies outdoors.