Don’t Let Tetany Be a Problem For You This Year

Jeremy Powell

Once cool-season forages begin to reemerge in your grazing pastures, grass tetany can become a potential problem. This disease normally occurs in Arkansas in the months of February, March and April and is due to an abnormally low level of magnesium in the cow’s body. Early signs of tetany include decreased appetite, decreased milk production, frequent urination, separation from the herd, increased excitability as well as a stiff or unsteady gait. These early signs may occur for as little as two to three hours, making early detection difficult. As the disease progresses, an affected cow will lose normal muscle control. This forces the affected animal to lie down, and they may become unable to get up. They will usually exhibit muscle tremors and spasms. If your cattle are not checked often, a dead cow can commonly be the first sign of a problem.

The cause of this disease is associated with the fact that cattle and other ruminant animals absorb magnesium from the intestinal tract much less efficiently than other species. Furthermore, magnesium (Mg) can become low due to losses in the milk of a lactating cow or due to an increase in the cow’s potassium intake. High potassium levels occur in young, rapidly growing forage and can be a problem in cool-season grasses such as fescue or in winter annual cereal grains like wheat and oats. High potassium levels directly interfere with the cow’s digestive ability to absorb magnesium.

Many other factors can be associated with the onset of this disease:

- **Weather can play a role in grass tetany.** It is usually cloudy, misty and/or cold when this disease occurs. These weather conditions decrease the plant’s ability to utilize magnesium, making it even less available to the grazing animals. Other stressors on the cattle such as hauling, penning or heavy lactation can also promote the disease.

- **Grass tetany most commonly occurs in mature, lactating cows and typically affects cows that are slightly over-conditioned and would likely be referred to the “best” cows in the herd.** However, it can also affect cows with a very poor body condition score that are excessively thin. Younger animals in the herd rarely have problems with this disease.
Spring fertilizer application can exacerbate problems with grass tetany. High potassium levels in the forage due to heavy fertilization of grazing pastures with potassium (pot ash) can in turn inhibit magnesium absorption in a cow's intestinal system.

All these conditions can potentially occur at the same time in late winter and early spring, leading to problems with grass tetany during that time of the year. Prevention is the key to controlling grass tetany. This can be achieved by dispensing a salt-mineral supplement containing at least 10 percent Mg that can be utilized daily by animals grazing tetany-associated pastures. Follow these suggestions.

- Provide 2 ounces of Mg oxide supplementation per animal per day.
- It must be provided on a daily basis because the cow's body has no ability to store up reserves.
- Several mineral feeders should be made available if stocking rates are higher for the herd.

Contact your county Extension office for more information about grass tetany and other cattle management recommendations.

10 Traits of Top Managers

Brett Barham

I recently came across a document on the web published by the University of Kentucky that discusses management skills for running an agricultural enterprise (it can be found at http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/1108/10.pdf). It has a short section that talks about how top managers often share some common traits. I think that even these business-minded traits fit well to cattle production, so I would like to take these ten traits and expand on them. While this is not an inclusive list, top managers are good at most of these items.

1. They know their costs of production.
   This is a huge tip to cattle producers. Without knowledge of what it costs you to produce your product, you are flying blind. It is very important to understand your costs and production levels. With that information, it makes it simpler to manage your herd well.

2. They set goals based on a clearly defined mission.
   If you have ever heard me give a presentation, I usually start the presentation on how important it is to set goals. Without goals, you are flying without a destination in mind – you don’t know which way to go or when you get there. Set goals that are specific – I would like to increase my average weaning weight by 25 pounds – and not general ones – I want to increase my weaning weights. The latter goal can be met by increasing weights by just one pound, not a big step and not one that will dramatically improve profitability.

3. They have good people skills – communication, leadership and empowerment.
   This one applies to cattle producers in several ways. First, in dealing with any employees, this seems like a no brainer. I think that where this trait may have the biggest impact is outside the herd. More people need to get involved in leadership roles in their local community and in professional organizations that deal with animal agriculture. Since the majority of people in the U.S. no longer have any ties to agriculture, it is very easy for them to forget about the people who produce their food. Good managers will be involved in their community and open to communicating how they produce the beef that feeds the general public. I think everyone knows the
saying, “If you want something done right, better do it yourself.” That applies to communication with the public. If we continue to let others tell the story of beef production, the true story will never get told.

They access, assess and use information (they are voracious record keepers).

In case you skipped Number 1, knowing your cost of production is important. Without records, you cannot calculate your cost of production. It is also important to strive to keep up to date on the beef industry. The beef industry is dynamic, and producers need to understand the changes occurring in the industry. I hope each of you look to Extension to help with this step, after all that is what we are here for.

They are innovative and adapt to change.

This one is tough for many producers. The beef industry is full of tradition, and change can be difficult. It is important to understand that just because something has been done in the past does not mean that it should continue to be done the same way in the future. For some, there may be a temptation to take this concept too far and be “over” innovative to the point that cost of production goes backwards.

They are dissatisfied with the status quo.

I think this goes back to the importance of setting goals. Once a goal is reached, it needs to be re-evaluated and determined if a new one should be made to further challenge you to improve.

They can organize, focus and prioritize.

Remember Number 2 and Number 4? Once again, goals and records are critical in planning your business (i.e., your cow herd).

They view the future aggressively.

It is difficult to get a good handle on the future of the beef industry. Increased input prices and potential for increased regulations can sure put a damper on any positive outlooks for the future. Good managers will look beyond these negatives and look for opportunities to exploit to take advantage of a changing market.

They are willing to assess and take risks.

Risk is something that cattle producers are used to dealing with. Feed price fluctuations and drought are common, and most producers have experience in handling this type of risk. However, on occasion there are some opportunities that involve risk that most producers fail to take advantage of. Many of these deal with marketing. Being open to changing marketing plans when there is an opportunity to take advantage of an imbalance can be one of the best opportunities for producers. If the markets indicate that keeping them 60 to 90 days past weaning and putting a few extra pounds on them will be profitable and you have the capability to do so, why not take the chance to make some extra money. Remember, without risk there is no reward.

They take time to recharge.

This one is tough for beef producers. Beef production is a 24/7/365 business. Cows don’t take holidays, and neither should you. Right? Wrong! Take some time for yourself and your family. Take a vacation, go to a conference to give you new insight on managing a cow herd, go fishing, do something that will give you a mental break – you will approach your business or cow herd with new vigor and a clear mind. If needed, form a “vacation cooperative” with your neighbors to give each of you time off while making sure the needs of your cows are met while you are off. A person who is suffering from burnout is much less likely to use tips 1 through 9. Your cows, family and mind will thank you!

As always, contact your local county extension office to get information that will allow you to become a manager that possesses some of the qualities listed above.
River Valley Beef Conference Set for February 17

Jeremy Powell

An exciting agenda has been set for the 2011 River Valley Beef Cattle Conference. The meeting will take place at the Lewis Livestock Auction in Conway, Arkansas, on February 17. Registration at the door begins at 9:30 a.m.

This year’s conference, which is sponsored by the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service and Farm Credit Services of Western Arkansas, will cover many interesting topics that are important for profitability in today’s market. Speakers and topics for the program include:

**John Jennings**, professor of animal science for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, will discuss managing pastures for yearlong grazing. Many producers may be able to reduce winter feed costs by increasing the number of grazing days each year.

**Don Hubbell**, director of the UofA Livestock and Forestry Branch Station near Batesville, and **Paul McNeal**, a livestock producer, will conduct a live animal demonstration. They will be identifying different factors for consideration when appraising cull cows.

**Lewis Wray**, equine educational compliance instructor for the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission, will discuss Arkansas’ branding laws and how to register a brand. There will also be a live branding demonstration conducted by **Earl Pepper** and **Mike McClintock**.

Registration for the program is $20 at the door. Lunch will be provided at noon, and the program will conclude around 1 p.m.

For more information, contact your county Extension office.

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