Livestock Production

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A Black Bag Saves Vet Costs

Have you ever had difficulty locating a veterinarian when you really need one? It is becoming increasingly difficult to find cow/calf veterinary service in some areas. In fact, if your ranch is not close to a dairy belt or urban center, there may be no large animal veterinarians within driving distance.

There is good news. The tools necessary to take care of the majority of health problems on a cow/calf ranch are readily available. These tools should be part of the farm's "black bag" veterinary kit. Building your black bag is a wise investment. If it saves the life of one cow or calf, you are money ahead.

Lack of veterinary service on a ranch presents many dilemmas. Prescription pharmaceuticals cannot be purchased without a valid veterinarian/client relationship. Also, there are many procedures and treatments that can only be accomplished by a veterinarian, such as tuberculosis testing and drawing up health papers.

Prescription pharmaceuticals, as well as over the counter (OTC) medications, will become increasingly more difficult to purchase. Society is demanding a higher accountability of its food source. OTC antibiotics are a likely casualty of this debate. Tuberculosis and brucellosis testing will continue to require the services of an accredited veterinarian. However, there are many diagnoses and treatments that can be accomplished at the ranch level.

1. The first step necessary for becoming a "shade tree" veterinarian is understanding cattle behavior. Cattle will demonstrate illness or injury by changing behavior. It is very important to be able to identify unusual cattle behavior that may indicate illness. Observe your cattle and learn.

2. The second step is to construct a treatment facility with a headgate and "sick pen" that is under cover.

3. The third step is to assemble a "black bag" to intelligently tackle health problems that have occurred previously on your ranch. The chart shows items I commonly recommend.

Items for your veterinary "black bag"

Equipment

1. A sturdy tool kit
2. Thermometer with a string and alligator clip
3. One box each of 16-gauge and 18-gauge needles 1-1.5 inches long for vaccinations and antibiotic therapy
4. Six 14-gauge 2-inch needles for intravenous therapy
5. IV simplex hose
6. One box 12cc syringes (give no more than 10cc at any site)
7. Two 60cc syringes for IV antibiotics
8. Obstetric chains and handles, obstetric jack optional
9. Newberry Knife or Elastrator bands and applicator for castration
10. Dehorner/hot iron for cauterization of blood vessels
11. One box vet wrap, roll cotton and 2-inch adhesive tape for pressure wrap of limb lacerations
12. Balling gun for administering pills
Nonprescription pharmaceuticals

1. Penicillin G
2. Long-acting tetracycline
3. Aspirin for pain relief and fever reduction
4. Wound spray and fly repellent spray
5. Obstetrical lubrication
6. Seven percent iodine for navel cord care
7. Dewormers

Prescription pharmaceuticals
(if veterinarian prescribes)

1. Magnesium gel for grass tetany treatment
2. Calcium, magnesium and phosphorous fluids for grass tetany and hypocalcemia
3. Respiratory antibiotics (Naxcel, Micotil, sulfas)
4. Banamine for fever reduction and anti-inflammatory treatment

Now that the equipment is assembled, how do we employ what we have to improve the health of our animals? First, we observe an animal with unusual behavior. Next, we segregate that animal into a restraint facility for examination. Use your senses of sight, smell, touch and hearing (taste is rarely necessary) to help in arriving at a diagnosis. After the animal is restrained, always take a rectal temperature. Temperatures exceeding 103 degrees usually indicate infection that would indicate an antibiotic and a fever-reducing agent. If the temperature is in the normal range (about 101.5 degrees, give or take a degree) a systemic infection is not present and an injectable antibiotic would not be necessary. An obviously infected wound is a notable exception to this rule.

Learn to recognize respiratory infections. Early treatment of pneumonia is more important than selecting the correct antibiotic. A stethoscope is not necessary for early diagnosis of pneumonia. Coughing, snotty noses, droopy ears and a fever will point to pneumonia faster than a stethoscope.

Obstetrical cases should be approached with patience and only minimal mechanical assistance. Two strong men should be sufficient for most deliveries. Use ample lubrication and never hook tractors or trucks to the legs of a calf.

In summary, it is important for the cost-efficient cow/calf rancher to handle much of the herd health. The rancher must be a student of cattle behavior to be of benefit in a cattle health program. The rancher must also assemble some basic tools in a "black bag" to be effective.

The chart provides clues to the procedures a rancher could, and should, learn to do himself. Use the needles and syringes to vaccinate for common respiratory viruses, leptospirosis (nine-way) and clostridial (seven-way) organisms. Learn how to dehorn, castrate and handle 99 percent of all calvings. Be prepared to treat an emergency grass tetany, diagnose and treat respiratory infections, and treat most lacerations-unless surgical intervention is necessary.