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Control Flies on Livestock

There is an insect pest that can cause much annoyance and economic loss to livestock and humans alike. What am I referring to? Flies are a typical summertime problem for many of us. This week I would like to take a look at some of the major fly problems in livestock operations.

It's summertime once again, so the flies are here in force. In fact, their populations are growing in many animal production facilities, including cattle operations. To achieve the best control, management and prevention of flies, it is important to know what fly species is causing the problem in each situation. Three fly species are major pests of cattle – horn flies, stable flies and house flies. The following are the basics about all three producers should know.

Horn Flies - Male and female horn flies bite and feed on the blood of animals. They are about half the size of house flies. Horn flies usually gather on the shoulders, back and sides of animals. On hot days they move to the underside of the belly. Unlike other flies, they stay on the animal and leave only when disturbed or when females lay eggs in fresh animal feces. The ways to control horn flies, include ear tags, sprays, pour-ons, dust sprays and back rubbers.

There are several brands of all of these for producers to choose from. Typically, we think of one ear tag per animal as good enough. This may be the case for horn flies because not every animal needs to be tagged for horn fly control. Tagging every third animal with one tag will provide good control, as horn flies move between animals and eventually will take blood from the tagged animal – which will kill the fly. Try rotating two years on organophosphate tags, one year on pyrethroid tags, two years on organophosphate tags, and so on.

Stable Flies - Male and female stable flies bite and feed on blood from animals and people. They leave black or dark red spots on surfaces where they rest. With respect to cattle, bites most often occur on the legs. A typical reaction to stable flies by cattle is bunching up and standing in water, which helps protect from bites, but reduces feeding and decreases weight gain. Larvae develop in manure mixed with soil, straw or hay, as well as in decaying spilled grain and fermenting grass clippings. Development of the stable fly from egg to adult takes three to four weeks.

Currently, there are no effective control methods for stable flies on pastured cattle. Research indicates that stable flies in pastures develop in sites where round hay bales are fed to cattle during the winter. Steps should be taken to minimize hay waste and accumulation or to spread the wasted hay into thin layers.

House Flies - Despite their name, house flies can be found outdoors as well as in. House flies do not bite but can transmit food-borne and animal pathogens. House flies generate brown or yellow spots on walls and other surfaces where they rest. They are common from spring to late fall. House fly larvae can develop in any decaying organic substrate, including manure, compost and garbage. Under ideal conditions, development from egg to adult takes only 8 days.

The key to controlling house flies is a good sanitation program that includes maintaining good drainage, cleaning around feed bunks, under fences and gates, and around water systems.
Another means of control are baits and residual sprays that can help control house flies. Baits are available in granular form or a form that can be dissolved in water for paint-on application. Sprays are applied where the flies rest.

Kansas State Research and Extension has the following publications, which can be found at your local Extension office or on the KSRE homepage, relating to the topic of fly control for livestock. Managing Stable Fly Production at Pasture Feeding Sites (MF-2662), Managing Insect Problems on Beef Cattle (C671), Lice Mange and Other Swine Insect Problems (C676), Managing Insect Pest on Sheep and Goats (MF977).