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Foot Rot in Wet Conditions

There is something completing and satisfying to the life of a cowboy, when turning cattle out cows on green grass. However, the work is never done and challenges shift from one season to the next. The recent rainfall has been very welcome in keeping that grass green and growing, but it also has created pastures that are muddy, soggy, and standing in water. These conditions can increase the likelihood of "foot rot" in grazing cattle.

"Foot rot" is somewhat of a generic term used to describe infection, most often bacterial, in the foot of the animal. Foot rot is an acute or sub-acute necrotic infectious disease which causes swelling and lameness in at least one foot. The disease can cause severe lameness, decreased weight gain and lower milk production. If treatment is delayed, deeper structures of the foot may become infected, leading to chronic disease and poor recovery.

Fusobacterium necrophorum is the bacterium most often isolated from infected feet. This organism is present on healthy skin, but it needs injury or wet skin to enter the deeper tissue. Mechanical injury, cuts, bruises, puncture wounds or severe abrasions of the foot will damage the skin in the area between the toes and predispose an animal to infectious agents.

Lameness is usually the first sign of an infected animal, varying from barely noticeable to severe limping. Lameness is typically followed by reddening of the interdigital (between toes) tissue and swelling of the foot, causing the spreading of the toes. One or more feet may be affected simultaneously. Spreading of the dewclaws due to swelling is a classic sign of foot rot.

Treatment of foot rot is usually successful particularly when diagnosed early. The interdigital tissue should be cleaned and disinfected. Most cases respond readily to systemic antimicrobial therapy, administered the first days of diagnosis. If treatment is not initiated until later in the process, multiple treatments may be necessary. Visit with your veterinarian to determine the best antibiotic treatment for your cattle that have become infected with foot rot.

Prevention and control of foot rot begins with management of the environment. Management practices that help reduce interdigital trauma will help decrease the incidence of foot rot. Important preventative measures include a well-balanced mineral nutrition program and minimized exposure to conditions that can cause skin or hoof injury. Wet, muddy conditions in pasture was mentioned today, but allowing cattle to stand in ponds or muddy feedlots can be common culprits as well.

To summarize, foot rot is a major cause of lameness in cattle and can have a severe economic impact on animal health, animal performance and enterprise profitability. Skin and hoof lesions allow bacteria to invade live tissue. The most important preventive measures should focus on protection of interdigital skin health. Important preventative measures include a well-balanced mineral nutrition program and minimizing exposure to conditions that may cause skin or hoof injury. Treatment is frequently successful if the disease is diagnosed and treated early.

The OSU Fact Sheet AFS-3355 Cause, Prevention, and Treatment of Foot Rot in Cattle serves as the reference for this article and can be referenced to learn more. As with any health concern, consultation with your herd health veterinarian is often the most important first step.