



Wilson County

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News and Information from UT-TSU Extension Wilson County

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Avoid Grass Tetany in Cattle Herd This Spring

Spring is just around the corner with the possibility of lush green pastures that cattle wait for at the end of winter. These grasses will be lush and your cows will tear a fence down to get on the green pastures, but these grasses will be full of moisture and potentially diluted of minerals. This can lead to a condition known as grass tetany. Dr. Lew Strickland, UT Extension Veterinarian has the following information and suggestions

Grass tetany is a highly fatal disease associated with low levels of magnesium (Mg) in the blood. Grass tetany can affect all classes of cattle but older cows with calves on their side during late winter and early spring are most at risk. Cattle store Mg in their bones and muscles, but cannot readily access and utilize these stores when needed. The animal constantly loses Mg in urine, feces and milk, so when grazing lush green Mg deficient grass, cattle need Mg supplements to meet daily requirements. A cow in peak lactation (6–8 weeks following calving) needs a constant source of Mg to replace the large amount lost from the body in milk. Some causes of grass tetany are the lower Mg levels in cool season grasses and legumes, higher moisture content in grass, low intake of phosphorus among other things.

Animals suffering from grass tetany are often found dead. There may be signs of struggle on the ground beside the animal indicating they were leg paddling before death. Early signs include some excitability with muscle twitching, an exaggerated awareness and a stiff gait. Animals may appear aggressive and may progress through galloping, bellowing and then staggering. In less severe cases the only signs may be a change in the character of the animal and difficulty in handling.

Blood magnesium levels must be restored. Veterinary administration of an intravenous calcium and magnesium solution produces best results. However, in acute cases where time is critical, producers can administer an Epsom salt solution via an enema while waiting on the veterinarian.

Producers should also provide oral sources of magnesium to affected herds to prevent relapses. These include a high magnesium content mineral, fed free choice during any period of potential grass tetany.

The goal of a well-managed prevention program should aim to eliminate factors which reduce magnesium absorption and provide a magnesium supplement. Provide good quality hay or silage to increase energy and roughage intake. Pellets or grain can be added but must be introduced carefully. Provide salt if a source is not available.

Prevention is the best policy where possible. It is a good idea to move lactating cows (especially older animals) to high legume and high dry matter pastures and provide good quality magnesium supplements through a high magnesium mineral.

Long-term management includes correcting soil acidity with lime, plant clovers and apply a phosphate fertilizer. Limit potash and nitrogen application until soil acidity is corrected and clovers are established. Keep good records to identify repeat offenders. Some cattle are more susceptible than others, so identification and supplementation of Mg may head off problems before they occur.

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