Cattle Checklist After a Flood: Issues to Consider

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Flood recovery can be a daunting task. The producers affected by the historic flooding in Colorado and Nebraska during September 2013 should consider some of the carryover effects of the floods as we move into winter and spring.

Pastureland
- Remove debris before restocking flooded pastures. Check for debris especially along fence lines and in corners. Livestock can be injured from pieces of barbed wire, metal and trash.
- Keep cattle away from wet areas of the pasture until the ground is solid. Not only can cattle damage plants by trampling wet soil, but can also get bogged down in the mud. Small calves will be more likely to get stuck, so keep an eye out for boggy areas.
- Standing water can ruin pastures for several reasons. Weeds take over quickly following such disturbances and there will be growth of unusual plants. If the standing water remains into spring, there will be areas where undesirable plants will invade. Take care to replant desirable plants to improve pastures where possible. If a lack of adequate forage develops, animals can be forced to eat poisonous plants which are more abundant in flooded pastures during recovery.

Alfalfa Fields
- Alfalfa can withstand submersion for a limited time, depending on its stage of growth. Dormant plants may withstand submersion for as long as seven to 10 days. Growing plants can usually withstand submersion for up to three to four days without damage.
- Alfalfa can recover from moderate silt deposits. Silt deposits of over two to three inches will weaken the stand, and you may need to regrade and re-establish in places.
- Limit reseeding of established fields to silted patches within the field. If the entire field is silted, rework and reseed the field. Where alfalfa stand is over two years old, over seed with temporary crop and reseed alfalfa at least one month after having reworked the field.
- You can reseed small areas with fast-growing grasses. This will help provide forage until the entire field can be reworked. In old fields, seeding to annual crops such as ryegrass will provide some hay and also will help control weeds.

Flooded Hay
- Flooded hay can be disposed of or used on fields as a fertilizer. Extremely wet hay can be hazardous and often unsafe for animal consumption. Due to time, weather conditions and overall expense, drying the hay may not be feasible. Since hay will heat and mold quickly, spread bales out to dry as soon as possible and turn bales often if you try to salvage it.
- Hay bales at 30 to 40 percent moisture content pose the greatest risk of fire. Check hay storage often for pungent odors, hot damp areas on the stack, emission of water vapors and other signs of heating. If possible, stack bales away from buildings and other feed storage in case of combustion.
- To check a stack’s temperature for fire risk, drive a sharp pointed pipe into the hay, lower a thermometer inside the pipe and leave it there for about 20 minutes. At 150 degrees F, the hay is approaching the dangerous combustion zone. At 170 degrees F, hot spots or fire pockets are possible. Inform the local fire department of your fire risk and have them on standby, just in case.

Cattle
- Take special precautions against flood-related accidents or diseases in livestock. Watch for symptoms of flood-related diseases, such as lameness, fever, difficulty breathing, muscle contractions, or swelling of the shoulders, chest, back, neck or throat. Make certain that vaccination programs are current since soil and water-borne diseases can be present in flooded areas for months following the flood. Even though flooding can increase risks of infectious diseases, producers should not be alarmed unless a serious outbreak of infection recently occurred in their herd prior to the flood. Often cattle are moved to neighboring high grounds during flooding. Be sure to monitor your herd’s exposure to other herds, as this co-mingling can increase health risks.
- Observe areas where large numbers of animals assemble to watch for any signs of infectious diseases, such as pneumonia or leptospirosis.
- These diseases are more likely to occur where cattle are crowded on wet ground and where there are a lot of horn flies and horseflies.
- Promptly report any sign of disease to the nearest veterinarian or county extension office. Contact a veterinarian about vaccinating animals for immunity from flood-related diseases, such as anthrax, leptospirosis and blackleg.
- Make certain any vaccines that require refrigeration were not damaged if power to refrigerators were off for an extended period of time. If the vaccines went without refrigeration, they may no longer be viable. When in doubt, buy new vaccines.

- Floods may wash stray metal objects like nails, fence staples or other sharp fragments into pastures or feed grounds. Placing a magnet in cattle will minimize the risk of hardware disease and is often a good insurance policy.

Rodent Control
- Following floods, rats and other rodents may move into buildings to escape flood waters. Snakes are often forced into places where they are not usually found. Upon re-entering flooded homes or buildings, be wary of these possibilities. Rats can carry disease and parasites, while snakes may be poisonous.

For additional information on cattle management please visit the Beef Cattle Information page on www.beefusa.org.