Fly Control Begins Now

By Joe Snyder

While "time flies when you're having fun," everyone knows time is not fun when you're having flies. Some estimates say flies cost the cattle industry $1.6 billion annually through treatment costs and by transmitting diseases, creating stress in the herd and causing weight and production loss in cattle. It's best to begin the fly season with a control plan in mind, factoring in cost, convenience, the physical layout of your ranch and animal movement.

Sanitation

Sanitation is the first line of defense against flies. Other programs, especially insecticides, work best when breeding sites (wet manure, straw, decaying feed) are being simultaneously eliminated. Effective sanitation methods include covering manure piles with black plastic, spreading manure thinly on the pasture to kill fly eggs and larvae, and using sawdust bedding instead of straw. Proper soil drainage is also important.

Scraping lots, replacing bedding from stalls, and removing manure from under fences and feed bunks at 7- to 10-day intervals helps prevent fly development. Face and horn flies deposit their eggs in fresh cattle droppings but the droppings lose their attraction within 5-10 minutes after passing from the animal. So when possible, spread the fresh droppings around to help it dry quicker.

Traps

Traps can be effective for stable flies but not face flies. Vertical white panels draw the flies, which are then led to bait and trapped with sticky adhesive or killed with an electrocuting grid. Large walk-through fly traps, positioned where cattle must pass through them regularly, can reduce horn fly numbers without using an insecticide. The tunnel-like trap brushes flies off the animals and the flies get trapped in the device and die. Traps can capture large numbers of flies but don't much impact total fly numbers and do nothing to eliminate fly breeding sites.

Natural Enemies

Some ranchers use parasitic wasps or beetles and mites, which are the main natural enemies of fly eggs and larvae and can reduce horn fly populations in some habitats.

Insecticides

Insecticides should be viewed as supplements to, not replacements for, sanitation and sound cultural practices. Contact your county Extension or veterinarian before using any insecticide to ensure the chemical you want to use is legal in your area — and effective. Follow label directions for use. Accurately record all insecticide use — the trade name, formulation, dilution, application rate and date of treatment.

Tags

Fly tags can work fast but are often used incorrectly, causing buildup of resistance in the flies. Common mistakes include putting tags on too early in the year, not tagging calves, using one tag per animal rather than one in each ear, and leaving the tags on at the end of fly season.

You've heard the saying, "That which doesn't kill us only makes us stronger." That applies to flies that build a resistance to chemicals used incorrectly. To avoid this, use an ear tag with a different chemical ingredient this year than you used last year.

Other Applications

Dust bags are hung low so that cattle contact them with their faces when entering a fenced-off area to get feed, water or salt. Backrubbers and oilers can be effective if properly placed and maintained. Self application devices like these must be serviced at least once a week.

Some producers use pickup-mounted sprayers and dusters but this can be expensive since the application needs to be repeated every 2-3 days. Do not apply on windy days, and do not contaminate feed or water. Attempts to apply insecticide by aircraft have not been very successful for face flies.

Insecticides can be added to supplements and fed to cattle so that they are present in manure to destroy fly larvae. Research indicates variable results. All animals must eat a minimal dose of a feed additive regularly and additional measures must be taken to deal with flies moving in from nearby herds.

Other application techniques include liquid feed and oral larvicides in mineral granules, mineral blocks or controlled-release pills.

Since fly resistance to pesticides builds up after a while, producers should frequently change treatment and use a combination of methods so that when one system weakens the war still goes on with spray, larvicide or another application.

Sources: Texas A&M University; University of California, Davis; Kentucky State University Extension; University of Arkansas Extension