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Cattle Handling During Summer Heat

Summer is rapidly approaching and some cattle herds have their breeding season underway. Producers that are engaged in artificial insemination of breeding cows and heifers need to be aware of the impact summertime temperatures and humidity can have on reproductive success.

Research, at Oklahoma State University in the 1980's, found that cows that were stressed shortly after breeding had substantially higher embryo loss than those left in more pleasant environments. The experiments tested the average core body temperature of the heat stressed cow by increasing it a mere 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

Rough handling of excitable cattle in hot weather can further impact body temperature and therefore reproductive performance. Recent data has been reported by Dr. Mader at the University of Nebraska research station near Concord, Nebraska. He found that moving yearling cattle just a small distance (2000 feet) during mild summer temperatures (80 degrees F.) could change the core body temperature by as much as 1.4 degrees F. This indicates that body temperatures of excited, stressed cattle being worked in hotter temperatures could elevate temps to critical levels causing high embryo mortality.

During hot weather, cattle should be worked before 8 a.m., if possible. Certainly all cattle working must be complete by about 10 a.m. While it may seem to make sense to work cattle near sun down, they may need at least 6 hours of night cooling before enough heat is dissipated to cool down from an extremely hot day.

Cattle that must be handled during hot weather should spend less than 30 minutes in the working facility. Drylot pens and corrals loaded with cattle will have very little if any air movement. Cattle will gain heat constantly in these areas. Therefore a time limit of one-half hour in the confined cattle working area should limit the heat gain and reduce excessive heat stress. Cattlemen need to work efficiently around their herd, but do not create unnecessary stress by "hurrying".

Make every effort to see that cool, fresh water is available to cattle that are confined for any length of time. During very hot weather conditions tightly confined cattle may drink more than 1% of their body weight per hour. Producers need to be certain that the water supply lines are capable of keeping up with demand, when working cattle during hot weather.

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