

VET VIEWS
CALIFORNIA CATTLEMEN'S MAGAZINE
DECEMBER 2007

Save an endangered species...your rural veterinarian!

You've probably heard the stories, "*We don't have a large animal vet in our area since Doc retired*" or "*I can't get a vet to come out on the weekends to work cattle*". It has become a common refrain. There are simply not enough rural veterinarians in practice on a national level and it is worse in the western states. Several beef cattle areas in California do not have a cattle veterinarian at the present time. The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates that only 17% of U.S. veterinarians do any food animal practice at all. At the same time our food animal production systems have become more complicated and the need for continuing education and advanced training of food animal veterinarians has become more critical. Congress is even beginning to see what a problem this is and has slowly begun to address the issue. But you may not want to count on them to solve the problem.

I receive dozens of calls and emails each week from producers looking for help on cattle health problems. One of my first questions is usually, "What veterinarian are you working with?" About half the time the answer is, "I'm not working with a vet on this problem." Further discussion will usually reveal about 50% of these folks are too cheap to call their local veterinarian, while the other 50% don't have a veterinarian in their area or don't know who to call from a nearby location. Given the extent of the problem and the fact that it is probably not going to be solved immediately, there are a number of actions that all producers can take to help deal with this problem and support your rural veterinarian—if you still have one!

- 1. Build a valid Veterinarian-Client-Patient relationship.** This is the key to avoiding many problems and opening the door to many solutions, including prescription drugs and emergency help. This relationship may be with an individual veterinarian or with a group practice. It helps eliminate the problem of "veterinarian roulette" when you really need help.
- 2. Be willing to pay for advice and not just services.** Many of us think we only need to hire a veterinary professional from time to time for routine services such as vaccinating heifers. When doing this work, they may be on the ranch for a few hours once a year. Then when a complex problem such as an abortion outbreak occurs we assume they know all that is necessary to solve the problem over the phone. These are unrealistic expectations! It requires a thorough understanding of individual herd management factors to solve complex problems. The only way to develop this understanding is for the veterinarian to work with the rancher on the total cattle health program. This means cattle producers need to involve their veterinarian and get advice on the important aspects of the cattle production system.
- 3. Plan ahead.** Develop a planned vaccination program with your veterinarian and review that program every year. Develop a reproductive herd health plan—including when to pregnancy check the cattle, when to Trich check and semen check the bulls, and how to wean the calves. Develop a deworming strategy and check to see if it is working with fecal egg counts. Develop prevention programs for common diseases such as pneumonia and foot rot.

- 4. Establish treatment protocols for the common diseases on your operation.** This would include diseases like pinkeye, pneumonia, calf scours, and foot rot. This includes which drugs and doses to use for these conditions. It also would include any prescriptions that may be necessary for these drugs if they are used in an Extra-Label or Off-Label manner. It should also include how to administer the drugs and how to perform the treatments. For example, long acting tetracycline may be the drug of choice for pinkeye that you and your veterinarian decide upon; however, if you don't use disposable latex gloves to examine the eye and don't use disinfectants on halters or nose tongs used to restrain the animals you may be doing more to spread the disease than to control it. Another example would be the treatment of calf scours—the drugs used are a minor concern versus the sanitation of the equipment used to treat the calves.
- 5. Be sure to know how to recognize the common diseases.** Have your veterinarian train you and your personnel to spot the common diseases your cattle may contract. This training will make you a better observer of cattle health problems. Also, learn to know when “you don't know”, so you can call for backup.
- 6. Have the right equipment and drugs on hand for common problems.** This is a critical part of the planning and training effort.
- 7. Examine sick cattle.** Learn to use a thermometer, to count respiratory rate, and pulse rate. This will be of tremendous help when you call your veterinarian about unanticipated problems.
- 8. Get a diagnosis.** When cattle die or have unexplained problems work with your veterinarian and the diagnostic laboratory to find out what the problems are. This is part of the ongoing monitoring that is necessary to make good, informed decisions.
- 9. Have valid prescriptions on hand.** For any Extra-Label drugs you use, be sure to have the prescriptions on file.
- 10. Keep records.** For all your treatments, vaccinations, deworming, etc. keep records and review those records with your veterinarian on a yearly basis.

There are also a few things you should *not* do when working with your veterinarian. If you have no intention of paying for your veterinarian's services, do not call. All the vet's costs are up front, so if 1 out of 10 clients doesn't pay; it severely impacts a rural veterinarian's ability to stay in business. It also has a negative psychological impact on the veterinarian and their family. Also, don't ask your veterinarian to do anything illegal. This includes cutting corners on health certificates and prescription drug use.

Hopefully, you have a good veterinarian in your area and someday there will be a replacement to take over. If we all follow the ideas listed above it will help us retain this resource in our rural areas.

John Maas, DVM, MS, DACVN, DACVIM
Extension Veterinarian
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis