

PARASITE CONTROL FOR CURRENT CONDITIONS

Hopefully more rain and snow this spring will end or moderate our current drought conditions. Alternatively, we may be entering our third summer of very dry conditions with poor forage production. This brings up the subject of parasite control in our beef cattle and its importance in these tough conditions. Our cattle have been working hard to maximize the available forage for many months. As they do so, they graze as close to the ground as possible and use the same grazing areas repeatedly. These are perfect conditions for the build up of parasites in the cattle. We need to be aware that parasite control this year will be critical for the health, reproductive efficiency, and well-being of the herds.

How do parasites damage cattle?

There are many different types of parasites and they all inflict damage in their own unique way. There are intestinal parasites that “steal” nutrients from their host’s intestinal tract. There are lungworms that damage the respiratory tract of cattle. Liver flukes damage the liver tissue and gut of cattle and make them susceptible to the fatal bacterial disease known as Redwater. Another problem liver flukes are associated with is decreased fertility. Studies have shown decreased pregnancy rates in replacement heifers and increased age to puberty in heifers infected with liver flukes. Thus, flukes can cause losses in a number of ways: (1) direct damage to the liver, with weight loss and diarrhea, (2) death loss due to Redwater secondary to liver damage of migrating flukes, and (3) decreased reproductive performance. Lice and other external parasites suck blood from the cattle and cause skin irritation. Another damaging aspect of parasite infestation is their effect on the immune system. Parasites decrease the immune response of cattle. This has two important results: (1) the parasitized cattle do not have as much resistance to infection, and (2) they do not respond as well to vaccines. In short, parasites cost you money in terms of decreased production and decreased health.

When is the best time to deworm?

The simple answer is whenever the cattle are going to go onto “new” pasture or range. “New” means the cattle have not grazed there during the last 4 to 12 months. The parasite eggs do not remain infective for long extended periods of time (particularly over summer or over winter—too hot or too cold for the eggs to survive). Therefore, if the cattle are going onto “new” pasture and you deworm them (kill “all” the existing parasites) the cattle will not be contaminating the new fields with parasite eggs. For many producers this translates into the fall and spring of the year. The bottom line is to deworm when the cattle are worked in the spring and the fall and just prior to the time they are put onto “clean” pasture or range. This year you may also want to consider a summer deworming, particularly if you utilize irrigated pastures in the summer. The build up of worms and other parasites has been exceptionally bad the last 2 years, so an additional treatment may be warranted. Remember, if you deworm the cattle and simply put them back on pastures they have been on for the last several weeks, the cattle will quickly become re-infested.

Do the dewormers kill all the different types of parasites?

The simple answer is no for most of the products. However, there are broad-spectrum products that do a very good job on many groups of parasites. The ivermectins (Ivomec®, Cydectin®, Dectomax®, etc) kill a large number of parasite species; other products (Levamisole®, Safeguard®, etc) are more focused on internal parasites.

What about liver flukes?

Currently, there are only two drugs available that are effective against liver flukes in cattle. Both work best against the adult flukes, but there is some effect on the migrating juvenile flukes. Clorsulon is effective only against liver flukes and it is sold alone as Curatrem® or in combination with ivermectin as Ivomec® Plus. Thus, Curatrem® can be used to kill the flukes or Ivomec® Plus can be used to kill the flukes plus the internal parasites (worms) and external parasites (sucking lice). Additionally, albendazole (Valbazen®), which is an oral preparation, has activity against flukes and internal parasites.

What about the generic ivermectin products?

There are a number of ivermectin products that have been FDA-approved for several years and the patents have expired. Thus, there are generic ivermectin products that are now available commercially. Unfortunately, the chemical composition of these generic products does not have to be identical to the original patented products. Thus, often the effectiveness of the generic products is not identical to the original. It is my opinion that some of the generics do not possess the same biologic potency as the original formulations and may not be as effective. Before using any generic dewormer for cattle, you should discuss this choice with your veterinarian.

Are the pour-on products better than the injectable products?

Not necessarily. If lice control is a major consideration for your treatment program the pour-ons can have advantages. However, if fluke control is important, then the oral Curatrem® or Valbazen® products or Ivomec Plus® injectable will need to be used. Be sure to visit with your veterinarian regarding the best dewormer products and the best times to use them on your herd. Remember, the best timing and products may be different for your herd than for your neighbor's herd. Seek some good advice and do what is best for your operation. Be sure to read and follow all the label directions including withdrawal times and safety precautions.

John Maas, DVM, MS
Diplomate, ACVN & ACVIM
Extension Veterinarian
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis