Wilson County Agricultural Article from Ruth Correll, Agricultural Extension Agent

Grass Tetany – “An Ounce of Prevention” Is A Good Idea

Most cattle producers are looking forward to warmer days and good green grass. As temperatures begin to warm, cool-season grasses and legumes begin a rapid growth phase resulting in the production of large amounts of lush, highly palatable pasture. Unfortunately, early in the growing season, these forages are very high in moisture content and nutrients are diluted. The result is that it is difficult for animals to eat enough dry matter to meet all of their nutrient requirements. A problem sometimes seen early in the grazing season is something referred to as grass tetany.

Grass tetany, sometimes called grass staggers or hypomagnesaemia, is a metabolic disorder of cattle related to a deficiency of magnesium. Cows in early lactation are the most susceptible, with older cows considered more susceptible than those with their first or second calves.

Grass tetany usually occurs when animals are grazing lush pastures in the spring, but it can occur during the fall as well. Grass tetany is typically seen in cows in early lactation grazing cool-season grasses during cool, cloudy and rainy weather and often occurs when cool weather is followed by a warm period. Rapidly growing, lush grasses create the greatest problem. Grass tetany has occurred on orchardgrass, timothy, tall fescue, annual ryegrass and small grain pastures. Fortunately, the risk of grass tetany decreases on pastures that contain over 30% clovers.

The greatest risk for grass tetany is when pastures soils are low in available magnesium, high in available potassium and high in nitrogen. High rates of nitrogen and potassium fertilizer are sometimes associated with increased tetany problems.

Unfortunately in many cases of grass tetany, symptoms are not noted and the only evidence is a dead cow. In mild cases, milk yield is decreased, and the animal is nervous. These signs indicate the need for preventive measures.

Animals affected by acute grass tetany may suddenly stop grazing, appear uncomfortable, and show unusual signs of alertness, such as staring and keeping their heads and ears in an erect position. Cows may also stagger and lie down and get up frequently. Animals often lie flat on one side with periodic foreleg paddling, and a chewing motion that produces froth around the mouth. Animals usually die during or after a convulsion unless treatment is given.

The good news is that grass tetany can be prevented by feeding a high magnesium, free-choice mineral. Increased magnesium availability is especially important in herds having a higher percentage of older cows.
Treatment of cows in the early stages of grass tetany can be effective. Producers that have experienced grass tetany should contact their herd health veterinarian. As a follow-up treatment, the animal should be removed from the tetany-producing pasture and fed hay and concentrates. Cows that have had grass tetany and survived are more likely to get it again later in the season or in future years.

Death from grass tetany can occur quickly and it is often too late when producers first observe animals in distress. Benjamin Franklin once said, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” and that advice fits grass tetany. It is much easier and more cost effective to proactively manage cattle to prevent grass tetany than to treat it after it occurs.

Tennessee Agricultural Market Summary

Cattle Market Trends
Cow-calf producers who still have intentions of marketing calves this spring should keep a close eye on the market as lighter weight calf prices are expected to start a seasonal decline. Feeder steers unevenly steady, $188.00-$375.00; Feeder heifers steady to $3 higher, $175.00-$330.00; Slaughter cows steady to $3 higher, $88.00-$116.50; Slaughter bulls steady, $127.00-$145.00.

Grain Market Trends
Corn, soybeans, and wheat were down for the week. Corn cash price was steady to higher, $3.71-$4.10. May futures closed at $3.77 a bushel, down 9 cents. Soybeans cash price was steady to higher, $9.43-$10.03. May futures closed at $9.51 a bushel, down 35 cents. Wheat cash price, $4.78-$4.87. - May closed at $5.26 a bushel, down 10 cents.

For additional information on these and other topics, contact the UT Extension Office, 925 East Baddour Parkway, Lebanon, TN 37087, 615-444-9584 or acorrell@utk.edu. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in all programs. Visit the UT/TSU Extension webpage at http://utextension.tennessee.edu/wilson or look for UT & TSU Extension, Wilson County on Facebook.

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