

Early Detection of Fire Damage Can Minimize Cattle Losses Due to Fire

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COLLEGE STATION Analyzing injuries to cattle following a wildfire is important to minimize losses, said a Texas Cooperative Extension specialist.

“It might look like they’ve made it and there was no visible physical damage,” said Dr. Floron “Buddy” Faries, Extension program leader for veterinary medicine. “However, it’s important to have them looked at by a veterinarian as soon as possible because there could be secondary problems that lead to infections and further problems.”

Health disorders such as burned eyes, feet, udders, sheaths and testicles, as well as smoke inhalation with lung inflammation and edema are the most common problems, Faries said.

Wildfires have ripped across thousands of acres of rangeland, trapping cattle and causing injuries, and in some cases (no comma) death, said Ron Gill, Extension livestock specialist in Stephenville.

In one case, the producer lost about 50 head of cattle. Other producers are reporting secondary problems, such as scorched or burned cattle.

“One of the problems we’ve run into in the past is with the feet,” Gill said. “It may take 10 days to two weeks for the damage to start showing. The cattle will start sloughing the hoof wall and become cripple.”

The main thing Extension is working on with veterinarians is what symptoms to look for and what actions to take if lameness begins to appear, he said.

“To assure the welfare of the affected animals, veterinarians need to be consulted,” Faries said. “If, in the event the animal is not going to be able to be treated, decisions concerning sending them to market need to be made immediately before secondary complications develop.”

Faries advised having an animal evacuation and rescue plan in place and implementing it ahead of a wildfire. The plans should include ways of moving livestock to premises out of the fire danger zone and preventing any damages.

This may include loading the livestock into trailers and hauling them, or opening gates or cutting fences and releasing the livestock to drive them to a safer place, he said.

A fire danger zone is the area where the livestock risk inhaling smoke, he said, and will change according to the wind direction.

Smoke can move for miles, and cattle that are not near the flames or heat could suffer some damage, Faries said.

Contact with burning grass, weeds and brush causes immediate burns, he said. The severity of the burns will be determined by the degree of heat.

However, inhalation of smoke causes immediate irritation to the lining of the respiratory system, including nasal passages, trachea and lungs, Faries said. This can lead to inflammation, edema and emphysema, with the severity determined by the duration of inhaled smoke, he said.

“The time it takes to cause damage might only have to be a few minutes with high quantities of smoke and may be

hours in low quantities of smoke,” he said.

In addition, the lining of the eyelids and eyeballs can be irritated and lead to secondary infections causing additional illness or even death, Faries said.

Once the fire has passed, a veterinarian should be consulted immediately for any animals with severe burns or direct smoke exposure. Other livestock should also be evaluated for possible health disorders and treatment or determining if the animal can be salvaged for slaughter or should be euthanized, he said.

The prognosis of mild cases may be good with treatment and will be cost-effective, Faries said.

Monitoring should continue for weeks after the event, he said, because of the secondary complications that could be indicated by a cough or cloudy eyes in the animals.

“Before these secondary complications of infection occur, immediate slaughter for human consumption may be the most appropriate humane procedure,” Faries said. “Prior to slaughter, an antemortem inspection will be conducted by veterinary meat inspectors to determine safety and wholesomeness for human food.”