Regional Beef Notes
Spring 2010

It’s the time of year to start thinking about prepping your pasture for the spring. As the grass begins to “green up” with the warmer weather and longer days, so do weeds. Take a walk through your pastures, without neglecting the fence line, and look for anything that appears abnormal or more simply anything that is not your grass. Most broadleaf weeds are hard to identify in the seedling stage, but catching them early is a critical step in the control of them. Even in the seedling stage, their leaves will be much wider than the blades of your forage. If there are just a few broadleaf plants, you may want to simply pull them up, but if the concentration is too high, chemical treatment of your pasture may be warranted. There are several chemicals on the market that are labeled specifically for pastures. Make sure you read the label and follow the appropriate precautions when using a herbicide. There may be grazing, milking and slaughtering restrictions that should be followed also. When in doubt, contact your local Cooperative Extension Office or the Crop Data Management System’s website at www.cdms.net where you can search chemicals by brand name to get their label. While on your pasture walk, some other things to check for are stand thickness, making sure that there are no bare spots in your field, loose soil and leaf spotting. Patchy spots, loose soil and leaf spotting could be very serious problems so the sooner you note them, the sooner you can start treatment. Continued pasture walks throughout the year are essential to maintaining the quality of your forages year round.

The quality of your forages is largely determined by the condition of the soil that sustains them. The NCDA Agronomic Division provides a free soil testing service and recommends that soil tests be performed every two to three years. Soil sampling boxes and forms can be procured at your local Extension Office. Please be advised that January-March is when a majority of soil samples are taken across the state, so there is a backlog of samples to be analyzed; therefore, the wait time for results may be up to 6 weeks. If you need help interpreting the test results, consult your local agriculture agent.

Many farmers in the piedmont and coastal plain areas of North Carolina prefer to use poultry litter as a fertilizer source for their pastures. Using litter can provide sufficient amounts of Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium, all of which are needed for optimum soil health and grass growth. Before applying litter to your pasture, make sure that it has been tested for nutrient content. The NCDA provides nutrient content testing of litter samples for $5 a sample. Use these test results in conjunction with the results of your soil test to determine appropriate land application rates which will in turn protect the water quality on your land as well as discourage an over abundance of Nitrogen and the problems associated with it down the line. As a side note, for cattle health, when using poultry litter as your fertilizer, it is recommended that you supply your cattle with a high magnesium mineral year round to reduce the incidence of grass tetany. Bulk minerals can usually be purchased through your local cattlemen’s association.

To have productive cattle, you must have productive pastures. Achieve these dream pastures by soil testing, fertilizing, catching weeds early before they take over and involving your local agriculture agent so that you are receiving the most up-to-date, research based information on the subject.
Diseases of Interest
Richard Melton, County Extension Director, Union County Center

Over the last year two specific diseases have expressed themselves in the area in beef cattle operations. They are Anaplasmosis and Rabies. Both can have serious impacts in a cow herd. One of them can have serious impact on the cow herd managers/workers. As a beef producer in south central North Carolina, you need to be aware of both.

Anaplasmosis is caused by the blood parasite, Anaplasma marginale. This parasite lives in the red blood cells of the infected animal. It is not uncommon in the deer herd in this region. In the last year several beef herds in the region have been quarantined due to infection. The disease can have a mortality rate of 5%-60%. It typically is most severe in hot weather. However, it can persist in a cow herd and be expressed when the animals go under stress. With the stressful winter weather we have had so far this year, it would not be unusual for it to be expressed. The most susceptible animals are those under the most stress such as aged cows or 1st or 2nd calvers.

The disease is spread by blood movement. The most common form being the movement by blood feeding insects. That includes mosquitoes, ticks, horse flies, stable flies or deer flies. Horn flies might also fit into that group. Another transfer method is the use of contaminated needles, dehorners and scalpels or razor blades. Once the animal contracts the disease it is a permanent carrier unless treated. Many times those carriers may not even express the disease.

The disease symptoms are rapid heart beat, labored breathing, elevated temperature, depression, muscle tremors, loss of appetite and a great reduction in milk flow. Animals may exhibit a deprived appetite evidenced by eating dirt or bones. Generally brood cows will appear very unthrifty. Many times the first recognition by a producer of a problem is animals going down in the pasture.

Treatment strategies can take several different routes. Testing the herd and culling infected animals to slaughter is one choice. However, the most common strategy once the disease has been identified is to treat the herd with an antibiotic feed supplement or use a feed supplement along with an antibiotic injection. Your veterinarian can help you develop the strategy that works best for you.

Rabies is a disease of most mammals, including man. It is present in this region of North Carolina and has been seen in wildlife in the area for several years. The end result of untreated rabies infection is typically death. That is why it is so important to get a diagnosis as soon as possible. Once symptoms are expressed, it is almost impossible to stop. However, vaccination early on after infection can stop the disease.

In cattle the disease is expressed in two forms or a combination of those two forms. The furious form is usually paralysis or other animals. The next stage in the furious form is usually paralysis and death. All these stages can happen in a matter of 5-6 days. The dumb form is another expression. The animal acts very quiet and withdrawn. It can not swallow and losses body condition. Death usually occurs in 5-6 days.

Both forms open the door for caregivers to be infected. Any exposure to body fluids from an infected animal has the potential to infect others including humans. If you suspect rabies do not destroy the animal’s brain. That is the primary organ used in diagnosis. Get the animal tested. It is your responsibility to tell anyone involved in the handling of the animal what you suspect. As a rule, most professionals who have the potential to come in contact with rabid animals have received a vaccination. However, many times they will want to booster their personal vaccination program if made aware of a positive diagnosis.

Rabies on the farm is best controlled by making sure your farm dog is on a vaccination program. There are vaccinations that can be used in the cow herd. Most folks do not regularly vaccinate for rabies. However, if there is a high incidence of rabid animals in the area your cattle are kept in, you may want to consider adding it to your health program.

Both Anaplasmosis and Rabies can have serious impacts on your cow herd. Rabies can have a serious impact on you and anyone who comes in contact with an infected animal. Be aware of the symptoms and watch your herd accordingly.
Castration of calves is a common and necessary practice in the agricultural industry today. Castration reduces management issues with aggressive behavior that is evident with bull calves. Bulls are castrated because feedlot owners prefer steers; therefore they are willing to pay more money for them. Steers can also be grouped with heifers with no fear of unwanted pregnancies. Consumers prefer meat from steers because castration improves the quality. Meat from bulls has a tainted taste that is unappetizing to most consumers. Bulls should be castrated when they are less than 100 days of age to reduce stress on them and the producer.

Banding and cutting with a knife are the most prevalent techniques that are used to castrate. Even though bulls typically gain weight quicker than steers, because of higher testosterone levels, putting an implant in the steer’s ear makes up for this difference. Implants are fast, safe, and effective.

One person can safely castrate a newborn calf if they can protect themselves from the cow. Calves are easier to catch within 36 hours of birth. The procedure is performed by securely tying the calf’s rear legs and at least one front foot. Next cut off the bottom third of the scrotum either by using a knife or scalpel. Expose the testicles one at a time through the incision. Pull on a testicle until the muscle separates and pull the testicle out. Then do the same to the other testicle. Sever the cord as high as possible by scraping with the knife blade. If you do not do this, the cords act as a wick to pull bacteria into the calf and the calf may die from septicemia problems. Apply an antiseptic; give penicillin and an implant after you are finished.

Some producers do not have a way to protect themselves from the cow while working on the calf or prefer to work calves in groups. In these cases, producers need to put the calf in a headgate when they are a little older. A secure tail-hold is the best assurance against being kicked while castrating a calf that is standing. The calf’s tail should be grasped by another person near the tail-head and bent sharply upward and forward, taking care not to break the tail. Please see diagram. You also do not want to lift the calf off the ground; this is unnecessary and puts more work on the producer. Placing a bar behind the calf prevents it from kicking you and holds them in place when you open the headgate. Calves have a tendency to back up as the headgate opens and this saves time because it blocks them.

Banding is the least desirable method of castration. It does have its place for the producer who cannot handle the sight of blood. This producer should be aware that he has more opportunities for problems in the future. Bands oftentimes break, are not tight enough, or are applied incorrectly; therefore causing a stag animal. Stag calves are rejected at NC Graded Feeder Cattle sales. Also, calves that are castrated in this manner are subject to tetanus (lockjaw) infection.

Banding should not be used on calves over one month old. Place one rubber elastrator band over the prongs of the applicator. Next, expand the rubber band, and with the prongs toward the calf’s body, press both testicles through the ring, release the rubber band, and remove the applicator. Check to be sure both testicles are below the ring before and after releasing the rubber band. If you have made a mistake, cut the band off and start over. The calf will show discomfort for about 30 minutes. The scrotum should drop off in about two weeks. Calves will need a tetanus shot at the time of castration.

If you need help learning how to castrate your calves, please call your local Livestock Agent for help. This is a very simple management tool that every livestock producer can learn.
Calendar of Educational Events

March 30, 7 p.m.  Livestock Marketing Web Conference
Rocky River Alliance Marketing Meeting
Location: Stanly County Agri-Civic Center, Albemarle

April 12, 7 p.m.  BQA Certification Classes & Refresher Course
Location: Stanly County Agri-Civic Center, Albemarle

Pesticide Disposal Day in Stanly County is April 10, 2010, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. in the rear parking lot of the Stanly County Agri-Civic Center. This is for farmers, gardeners, and homeowners and there is no charge for disposal. Insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides will be accepted. No unlabeled products will be accepted and other restrictions may apply.

Norwood Area Feeder Cattle Sales Dates
- March 25 – Spring Stocker/Feeder Cattle Sale
- July 15
- July 22 – Value Added BQA
- August 19
- September 9 – Value Added BQA
- September 16

Consignments required - Call 704.983.3987