Protecting Cattle from Heat Stress

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When humidity and temperatures climb, keep a close eye on beef cattle. Temperatures in the 80’s and 90’s coupled with high humidity can cause heat stress. This stress causes general discomfort, decline in animal performance and even death.

Providing cool, clear water is probably the most important thing producers can do to help cattle overcome heat stress. Shade is a close second.

Clean, fresh and preferably cool drinking water in good supply is vital to beef cattle in hot humid weather. Water consumption declines if an animal’s water source is warm, dirty water such as that from a shallow farm pond. Check the water troughs daily to make sure there are no supply problems.

Keep cattle out of the sun from about 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. if at all possible. Sheds, trees, or other shade can reduce the radiant heat by as much as 40 percent. Have the shade in a location where there is a breeze and ensure that the sides are open for good ventilation. Without proper ventilation, heat and moisture accumulate and the animals will be stressed.

If heat stress is a big concern, keep checking the cattle. Temperatures above 104 degrees F are getting dangerous. Temperatures in excess of 107 degrees F are at the critical stage and can lead to possible heart failure. In northeast Oklahoma, we have added concerns because of the endophyte problems in fescue. When cattle graze endophytic fescue, their body temperature increases and heat stress just compounds this problem.

Do not work cattle through chutes, move or haul them during the heat of the day. If cattle become over heated and start panting, stop and let them cool down. Plan on hauling fewer cattle per load, which will reduce the heat production in the trailer. Plan your trips so cattle can be loaded and unloaded immediately. There is limited ventilation and poor cooling, if cattle have to stay on a still trailer for an extended period of time.

Humans aren’t the only ones suffering from the heat and humidity this summer. Cattle are feeling the heat, too. Be sure livestock have abundant cool, clean, water, adequate feed, and plenty of shade to help them deal with the extremely hot conditions.