

Cattle Business in Mississippi – November/December 2015 “Beef Production Strategies” article

Antibiotics and Subway

Cobie Rutherford – Extension Beef Cattle Associate, Mississippi State University

As I sit here writing this article I am looking at two pill bottles, a bottle of cough syrup, and a box of tissue paper. You see during the month of October, the weather started to change, I was travelling quite a bit, and perhaps, not exactly eating right. Before my trip to the Sunbelt Ag Expo, I went by the local Urgent Care to visit the doctor. I knew if I didn't get some steroids and antibiotics in my system that the State Fair crud would turn into a full blown illness. After two non-BQA recommended injections and three prescriptions, I was on my way to recuperating. In today's busy society, no one has time to be bothered by a cold. I would venture to say most people are just like me and do not hesitate to pop a few pills at its onset. I never question my personal use of antibiotics. I realize my immune system is capable of fighting off an illness on its own and while I am certainly thankful for that capability, I know antibiotics can quicken the process. With that said, why is everyone so concerned with farmers and ranchers using antibiotics judiciously in their cattle?

Just this week, the popular dining chain, Subway® jumped on the antibiotic free bandwagon. Now, my personal opinion is the brand needed a different type of media attention than they had been getting from the 'Jared' scandal so they pursued a venue that would gain them some positive attention. Marketing is consumer driven – we need to give our customers what they want. However, do consumers really know about animal welfare and the food safety precautions in place to safeguard our nation's food supply?

Just today, my dad called and had treated a calf with a cough. In fact, due to the dry fall we are experiencing, he has treated several sick calves this calving season. In the best case scenario, some of these calves would survive without treatment thanks to receiving an adequate amount of colostrum. However, while their immune systems were fighting off the 'cold', they wouldn't feel well and probably would not eat or drink due to a fever. If the body isn't receiving the nutrients to maintain health the immune system cannot function properly.

Unlike in humans, antibiotics are not a convenience. Treating sick calves is a lot of extra work. Farmers know herding a sick calf to the working facility is equivalent to herding a cat. Quick bursts of speed, followed by a coughing walk, then a quick turn make it an unpleasant experience for all involved. Antibiotics are also not inexpensive; treatment for a respiratory infection on a 500 pound calf can cost 12-30 dollars. Farmers would only go this amount of work and expense because they care.

On our farm, we do not tolerate an animal suffering. We know when we market cows they will be handled humanely from the time they leave our farm until they are slaughtered. I have full faith in the slaughter process and am thankful these animals can convert things inconsumable to humans to a nutritious and tasty product. Our rule of thumb is that if we wouldn't feel comfortable eating the animal, it will not go into the food chain and will be euthanized on farm. However, I am not alright with allowing an animal with a 'cold' to suffer based on public perception. We have the ability to treat these animals and prevent suffering. When consumers cannot make this link to animal welfare, it proves they are not informed. I am not on board with the Subway® decision and will not be frequenting their restaurant anytime soon.

As an industry, we need to become more proactive on our judicious antibiotic use in cattle. As producers, we need to insure consumer confidence in beef by working closely with veterinarians and having valid VCPR (veterinary-client-patient relationships). Make sure to follow vaccine withdrawal guidelines and please consider becoming Beef Quality Assurance certified.

I hope you have a great holiday season!

If you would like to contact me, my email address is cobie.rutherford@msstate.edu and phone is 662-325-4344.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.