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“Beef Production Strategies” article

Protect Cattle Operations from Theft and Other Crimes

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Current conditions are ripe for cattle thieves, and several crimes have recently made the news. Historically high cattle prices provide more incentive for cattle theft. Thieves get a bigger payoff for their efforts. Additionally, with more people out of work in recent years, theft may be more attractive to produce income or even beef for a freezer.

Recent estimates from the Mississippi Agricultural and Livestock Theft Bureau of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce indicate that crimes on agricultural operations result in 2 to 3 million dollars annually being lost in the state. An average of 250 head of livestock stolen and around 50 head of cattle killed contribute to this loss each year. Only around half of stolen livestock are recovered by law enforcement.

Cattle theft can happen in many ways. Traditional cattle rustling, where crooks roundup cattle, still occurs. However, modern techniques of cattle theft include using bad or fake checks and even false identities when purchasing cattle. Arrangements may be made to buy cattle with no intent or means to pay for the cattle. By the time the deception is detected, the cattle are often difficult or impossible to track. Swapping out livestock for less valuable stock and then pocketing the difference is another way cattle producers can be swindled. Therefore, it is important to learn about buyer reputations and avoid very risky situations.

Cattle producers must also be on the lookout for theft of other items common on cattle operations. Livestock, saddles, tack, farm equipment, timber, and agricultural chemicals are among the most widely reported stolen items according to the Mississippi Agricultural and Livestock Theft Bureau. In times of hay shortage, hay could also become a hot commodity for aspiring criminals. Agricultural chemicals such as ammonium nitrate can be used in drug production, so maintaining good security of these items is critical for reasons beyond financial loss from theft.

Aside from theft, cattle operations can be the victims of livestock shootings, arson, and other property damage. Personal safety could also be a concern if the victims are present during a crime. Confrontations with criminals and fires resulting from arson are potentially harmful situations for humans and livestock. In addition, vandalism can become a safety issue if it causes livestock to escape or equipment to malfunction.

To reduce the risk of being a crime victim, cattle operations should take steps to make their operations more secure and less inviting to prospective thieves and other criminals. Start by locking gates and doors, removing keys from vehicles and equipment, and posting warning signs. Several agricultural organizations have theft warning signs available for their membership as well as monetary reward programs for information

leading to arrests and convictions. Guard dogs and lights are other crime deterrents that are easily implemented.

Catch pens close to roads make it easier for thieves to load out cattle, especially during the winter feeding period when cattle are more responsive to feed buckets. However, do not assume that cattle are safe just because there is not a catch pen handy. Thieves may plan ahead and bring panel and fence cutters.

Above all, maintain close observation of cattle. Know current cattle inventory in each pasture or pen. Check cattle routinely but not always at routine times. By varying the pattern of times checking cattle, would-be-thieves will have a harder time trying to plan a heist feeling relatively certain that they will not get caught. Neighbors can be a tremendous ally in watching the operation for problems. Good communication with neighbors can benefit the entire group with respect to deterring crime. This is especially important when making plans to leave the operation for a few days or more at a time.

Animal identification and documentation is essential in recovery efforts after a theft. If cattle are not permanently identified and no pictures or other records of them are available, then tracking them down becomes much more challenging. For instance, just think of how many black-hided cattle there are with no readily distinguishable physical features. Temporary forms of animal identification such as ear tags are easily removed. Brands and tattoos are options for permanent identification that can contribute to cattle management programs in addition to being useful for identifying stolen cattle. Brands may denote individual animal identification and/or the ranch holding brand. Engraving driver license numbers on equipment and tools is an equivalent way to protect these items. Keeping an up-to-date file of photographs and records is another good safeguard for all ranch property that can prove highly valuable in recovery efforts and for insurance purposes.

If a crime happens, report it to local law enforcement immediately. Contact the Mississippi Agricultural and Livestock Theft Bureau right away for assistance with agriculture-related crimes. The Bureau's tip line is 1-800-678-2660. They have nine investigators located throughout the state that can follow up on agricultural crime reports. Local auction markets can be another good partner in trying to recover stolen livestock. Let them know what to look for in case your animals show up there to be sold. Finally, notify others that might experience similar problems. Reporting cattle thefts and other crimes to neighbors and industry groups may increase alertness in the community and help prevent a future crime.

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