

Cattle Business in Mississippi – October 2005
“Beef Production Strategies” article

Hurricane Recovery Information for Beef Producers

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With Hurricane Katrina still vivid in our minds, many Mississippi beef cattle producers are facing enormous challenges in the coming weeks and months. As recovery efforts proceed, many producers are asking similar questions. Here are a few answers that will hopefully assist producers in getting back on their feet. As in every production effort, keep human safety the top priority. Material possessions and even livestock can be replaced, people cannot.

Question: Fences are down throughout South Mississippi. What can be done?

Answer: Use of solar chargers and polywire electric fencing is a quick temporary fix for producers who have access to this equipment. Cattle should be gathered up and kept off of roadways as best possible. Watch for downed power lines and other hazards in the process of rounding up cattle. Be careful not to overcrowd cattle in small areas for extended periods of time. Perimeter fencing is the first priority. Portable facilities should be shared among neighbors when available.

Question: Cattle are roaming together free-range due to fencing problems. What are the potential impacts of unwanted commingling of cattle?

Answer: Unwanted commingling of cattle can create herd health and breeding issues. Make notes of commingling situations, and separate cattle once necessary facilities and/or fencing issues are resolved. Electric fencing with solar chargers is a rapid, temporary solution for separating cattle where permanent fencing is down and electricity is unavailable. It will be important to resume a herd health program in consultation with a veterinarian to address possible disease concerns.

Question: Salt water washed over pastures and ponds as a result of Hurricane Katrina. What concerns does this create for livestock?

Answer: Cattle must have adequate supplies of fresh water to survive. Water consumption needs are particularly high during periods of hot or warm temperatures. Providing fresh water is the first priority. Use water tanks, and solicit assistance from neighbors and local fire departments for immediate water needs. Forages contaminated by salt water may be unpalatable to livestock. Be sure to provide livestock with another source of forage or feed until pastures are cleansed by rains or otherwise. In addition, salt water contamination of soils or water standing on pastures or hayfields for extended periods of time may result in stand losses and render soils unproductive for acceptable forage growth. Bermudagrass and bahiagrass are fairly tolerant of high salinity. Overseeding cool-season species may be problematic if salinity is still present during seeding as these forage species are less tolerant of high soil salinity levels.

Question: Feed supplies are storm damaged, and available feed does not necessarily match what cattle are accustomed to consuming in terms of ingredients and/or nutritional value. How should this situation be handled?

Answer: Beware of feeding moldy or otherwise unsafe feeds to livestock. Make sure that feed is not contaminated by chemicals as a result of the storm. Abruptly changing cattle diets can result in bloat or other nutritional disorders that threaten livestock health. Attempt to slowly shift animals onto new diets by increasing the amount of the new diet offered to animals in 0.5 to 1 lbs. increments over several weeks. Watch cattle closely for signs of distress, and make sure that plenty of forage or other roughage is available to them along with free-choice quality mineral supplements and clean water. Young, growing animals may be most susceptible to nutritional disturbances.

Question: Winds from Hurricane Katrina destroyed the protective wrapping on baleage. What can be done with the baleage?

Answer: Baleage exposed to the elements will spoil rapidly if not fed immediately to livestock. Uncovered baleage is most likely a loss unless it can be rewrapped or placed in a sealed bunker rapidly.

Question: Many oak leaves and acorns are down in hayfields due to Hurricane Katrina. Is this a problem for cattle consuming the hay?

Answer: Winds from Katrina left oak twigs with acorns attached scattered across many hay fields. Cattle would need to consume a considerable amount over several days to create a toxic condition. There are likely not enough acorns in the hay to create a problem. Many acorns will sift out during hay raking and baling as well. Typically, acorn poisoning is not seen until late fall or early winter. In most cases grazing cattle with a good supply of forage and or hay will not eat acorns. However, this is an unusual situation and cattle should be checked on a regular basis. Also be sure to keep water tanks as free of debris as possible.

Question: Many trees were downed in the hurricane. What trees in South Mississippi could cause potential livestock disorders if their leaves or nuts are consumed?

Answer: Buckeye (horse chestnut), wild cherry (black cherry), oak

Question: The lack of electricity from the hurricane resulted in a loss of refrigeration for many cattle vaccines. Can they still be used?

Answer: Most vaccines have a very limited shelf life when left unrefrigerated. This means that they will not be effective in boosting cattle immunity when administered. Carefully read product labels, and discard unused product as appropriate.

Question: Storm-related livestock death losses have been experienced recently. What is the proper way to dispose of livestock carcasses?

Mississippi Board of Animal Health guidelines for disposal of livestock carcasses are as follows:

1. Carcass(es) must be buried at a depth sufficient to prevent offensive odors, fly breeding, and unearthing by other animals, and shall be covered under at least two feet of compacted earth and after each settles, more dirt shall be placed over surface to prevent ponding effect.
2. Carcass(es) shall be buried on the owner's property, or on another's property with specific approval of the owner, or in permitted landfills. The carcass(es) shall be buried at least 150 feet from adjoining landowners property, at least 300 feet from an inhabited dwelling, or on land not in cultivation.
3. Alternative disposal options must be approved by the State Veterinarian and/or DEQ on a case-by-case basis.
4. In case of the disposal of large numbers of animal carcasses due to catastrophe, it will be necessary to contact the Board of Animal Health for approval of the disposal site. A trench or pit shall be constructed in such a manner not to allow rainwater to drain and must be approved by the State Veterinarian.

For further information, visit the Mississippi Board of Animal Health's website at www.mbah.state.ms.us or call 1-888-722-3106.

Livestock Hurricane Recovery Website

Livestock-related hurricane relief and recovery information is posted online on the Mississippi State University Extension Service beef cattle website at <http://msucares.com/livestock/beef/hurricane.html>. This website contains public service announcements, contact information for many organizations assisting in livestock relief and recovery efforts, livestock disaster publications, updated answers to frequently asked questions, and press releases relevant to beef cattle producers. For example, information on routing of donations and supplies, USDA Farm Service Agency disaster area declaration information, and animal shelter information is kept current on this website.

Lessons Learned

Hurricane season is not over. In the event that another storm threatens Mississippi, there are some things that can be done in advance to lessen the impact on beef operations. As with people, evacuating cattle prior to a hurricane is the safest option. Know the possible evacuation routes. Cattle trailers must be kept in good repair and safe for hauling livestock on short notice. Trailers should have safe flooring, working lights, and a good set of tires including spares. It is advisable to take plenty of water, feed, hay, and veterinary supplies to the evacuation destination with the cattle. Cattle

should not be returned to the affected area until the hurricane has passed and it is safe to return.

When it is not feasible to evacuate cattle in advance of a hurricane, turn them loose in large pastures or pens on high ground. On some operations it may be best to tie open interior gates to give cattle access to more drinking water and provide them with a greater chance to move to safe ground. Cattle access to higher ground is particularly critical in all areas at risk of flooding. Do not pen cattle in small areas or place them in barns to ride out a hurricane. Cover sharp edges of equipment with hay bales or other "padding" to protect livestock from these objects in the event that high winds push them loose. Falling debris and collapsing buildings pose more of a threat to cattle safety than allowing cattle access to large pastures or fields. Secure or tie down loose items that may become airborne and injure cattle. Troughs and other items can be filled with water to help hold them down during high winds. Repair loose boards and tin on barns, pens, and other farm structures near livestock. Make fencing repairs such as replacement of rotten posts ahead of time so that fencing is as strong as possible before the storm hits.

High winds, rushing water, and falling trees can wreak havoc on fencing. Downed fences mean roaming cattle. Ensure that cattle are uniquely and permanently identified in case there are questions later about ownership of loose cattle. Hanging ear tags are easily lost and may not be unique enough to positively associate cattle with a particular owner. How many yellow #1 ear tags are there out there? Since radio frequency identification ear tags use 15-digit identification codes that are not likely to be duplicated, they work well to uniquely identify cattle. Permanent identification can consist of hot iron or freeze brands or ear tattoos. Proper records must be maintained for cattle identification efforts to be meaningful. Registering the farm for a premises identification code with the Mississippi Board of Animal Health as part of the National Animal Identification System may come in handy during storm damage assessments and recovery efforts. Pictures and video of livestock and other farm possessions taken prior to a hurricane may serve as useful records for insurance and disaster payment purposes after the storm has passed. Keep insurance up to date, and know the details of what is and is not covered under each specific insurance policy.

Have emergency supplies on-hand and in a secure location prior to a severe storm. As we have seen in recent weeks, delivery channels for supplies can be disrupted for extended periods of time following a natural disaster. Stock up on critical supplies in advance of extreme weather conditions. Fencing supplies and livestock pharmaceuticals and basic veterinary care products appear to be some of the most needed items following a major storm. Make sure cattle are current on all vaccinations ahead of time. Generators, water tanks, fuel, and other supplies are invaluable in disaster situations and are often in short supply under these circumstances. Protect feed and hay supplies as best as possible by stacking on higher ground and covering them to prevent water damage. Be sure to store gasoline and other chemicals in secure locations.

Do not put yourself at risk by checking on livestock during a storm. Human safety is paramount. Wait and check on livestock immediately once conditions are safe to do so.

Cattle may be stressed from extreme weather conditions and will need dry ground, clean water, forage or feed, and care for any injuries sustained.

Local county Extension offices can offer producers much needed information and help during the hurricane recovery efforts. In fact, county and area Extension personnel in Mississippi have been working tirelessly since Katrina to assist affected Mississippians. Many of these Extension workers and their families were affected by the storm as well. Now is the time for all of us to lend a helping hand to one another as we rebuild lives, homes, livelihoods, and communities. Contact your local county Extension office for more information on beef cattle production or related topics.