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Tick Talk

One of my favorite spring activities is hunting morel mushrooms, but often times I end up finding more ticks than mushrooms. There is a list of insect pest that I question why they were created and ticks go to the top, along with mosquitos! Ticks are actually not insects, *they are classified as arachnids, or relatives of spiders, scorpions and mites. Reports of heavy tick loads on livestock are surfacing, so let's dive into management of this livestock pest.*

This blood feeder commonly effects grazing livestock during the spring and summer months. In addition to the painful bites and blood loss from heavy infestations, these pests can be a biologic vector of anaplasmosis, cattle tick fever and other problematic diseases. There are two general types of ticks: the hard-bodied ticks and the soft-bodied ticks. Hard-bodied ticks are the most problematic in livestock. Often the first sign of a tick problem is noted in the ears, with cupping and/or drooping ears. Lethargic and anemic animals are additional things to watch for.

Ticks go through three developmental stages after hatching from the egg. Juvenile stages climb onto vegetation and wait for a passing animal; often parasitizing rodents, rabbits, raccoons and other small animals. After engorging on blood, they drop to the ground and molt to the next stage or to lay eggs. Adult ticks also access larger animals, by climbing onto tall grass or shrubs.

The principal ticks on livestock in Kansas are the American dog tick which is found throughout the state, the lone star tick which is found mostly in eastern Kansas, and the Gulf Coast tick in south central and southeastern Kansas. Gulf Coast tick seems to be on the increase in our part of Kansas, especially as southern cattle have been moved north during drought.

Pasture management is vital to control of ticks and is the primary first step. Brush and weed control in a pasture helps eliminate resting areas for ticks. Burning and herbicide use can be important tools to manage the risk. Burned areas have fresh regrowth and attract the grazing animal into those areas, where tick numbers should be lower. Unburned areas still harbor large numbers of ticks such as woody draws and areas where brush, shrubs and ground litter prevail.

Producers need to understand that combating all external parasites during the summer months requires a multi-pronged approach. Many products are available on the market to help control pests. Each product is designed to work in a specific way, against certain targets, for a specified amount of time. This space doesn't allow to go into the specifics of each. Expectations of a product lasting from spring turn out until the first frost, or to completely eliminate the pests, is simply unrealistic.

There are a multitude of animal health products to help specifically control external parasites in grazing livestock. They can include insecticide impregnated ear tags, pour-ons, sprays, oilers or dusters, injectables, and products in feed. Specific to ticks, are livestock dips. A combination of these products is most commonly utilized to provide control. As with any animal health product, it is extremely important to read and follow all label directions for use.

Ticks are annoying to livestock and costly to animal performance. Timely management and appropriate use of insecticides will help minimize their impact. Producers should develop an integrated management plan to combat these pests. It is always best to consult with your herd health veterinarian do develop a strategy tailored for you specific region. K-State publication MF-2653 discusses ticks in more detail.