Downer Cows

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Most cattle producers at some point will have to deal with a downer cow. The experience is often frustrating for a variety of reasons. Diagnosing the condition can be difficult. Even when a diagnosis is obtained, treatment can be unrewarding. Many times, the producer is left with an animal that eats, drinks, and appears healthy but is unable to rise.

Cattle go down for a variety of reasons. Electrolyte imbalances such as low calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and potassium may result in cattle becoming recumbent. A severe toxemia or infection such as a uterine or mammary infection are examples of illnesses that may result in a downer cow. Traumatic injuries such as hip dislocation or fractures to the limbs will result in a cow unable to stand. Obturator or sciatic nerve damage which is associated with difficult births may cause paralysis of one or both hind limbs. Lymphosarcoma if located in the spinal region also may result in the loss of function of one or all the limbs. Neurological diseases such as a brain infection may cause a downer cow.

Down cattle need to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Any cow found lying on its side (lateral recumbency) needs to be set up on its chest (sternal recumbency) as soon as possible. Cattle in lateral recumbency are prone to bloat which can lead to death. Producers may need to use some type of prop such as hay bales in order to keep the cow upright.

If the cow is in a poor location and needs to be moved, a sled should be used. Ropes or chains should never be tied around the neck or legs to drag the cow. This may result in more or additional damage to the cow.

It is wise to have a veterinarian examine the cow and begin treatment as soon as possible. The earlier the diagnosis and intervention occurs the better chance for recovery. Even if the animal does not recover, the diagnosis may be important in the treatment of other animals or preventing future problems. Some cows will have some secondary problems associated with being down and early treatment may limit these complications. Treatment success is never a guarantee but delaying the examination and testing will only increase the chance for treatment failure.

Recovery of a downer cow may take several days. During this time, it is important to have food and water that easily accessible. Deep bedded sand makes an excellent source for bedding material. The cow should be on a good bedding especially if the ground is hard or the cow is on concrete. The cow will need to be rolled from side to side 3 to 4 times a day to prevent secondary muscle and nerve damage. If possible, a downer cow should be elevated every day to allow circulation to all limbs. The ideal way to accomplish this is with a float tank. Unfortunately, this device is usually only available at university veterinary hospitals. This can also be done with hip lifters or slings. When using these types of devices, producers need to be careful not to cause further injury.

With the best of care, some animals will never get up. In one study, 16 healthy cows were anesthetized for 6, 9, and 12 hours. When the cows were allowed to wake up. Eight out the 16 were never able to stand. Sometimes the damage done to the muscles in the legs is not be reversible. Producers need to
have realistic expectation when dealing with a recumbent animal and be ready to humanely deal with an animal that is not going to rise again.

If producers would like additional information about how to deal with downer cows, they should contact their local veterinarian or County Extension Educator. Also, for additional information, the American Association of Bovine Practitioners has a position statement on how to deal with the care of non-ambulatory and injured ambulatory cattle at http://aabp.org/resources/aabp_position_statements/AABP_Non-ambulatory_Cattle-06.2013.pdf.

References