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Stable Flies on Pasture

Last month we discussed face flies and I promised to discuss other types of flies throughout the summer. Finding my cows bunched up in the corner of the pasture with their legs covered in mud this past week, indicates that it might be timely to discuss stable flies on pastured cattle. Stable flies aren't just an annoyance. They cause reduced average daily gain, and it may take as few as four flies per leg to cause economic injury.

Stable flies require daily blood meals, usually twice daily, depending upon the weather. They prefer to feed on all four legs and the belly of pastured animals. Their piercing mouthpart can cause pain and irritation to the animal. Additionally, as blood feeders they can vector disease, such as anaplasmosis. After feeding, the stable fly will seek a shaded resting location, off of the animal, to digest the bloodmeal. The stable fly is similar in size to the house fly but is dark gray and has dark irregular spots on its abdomen. The complete life cycle from egg to adult ranges from two to three weeks.

The female deposits eggs in spoiled or fermenting organic matter sometimes mixed with animal manure, moisture, and dirt. The most common developing sites are in feedlots, usually around feed bunks, along the edges of feeding aprons, under fences and along stacks of hay. Grass clippings and poorly managed compost piles also provide ideal larval developing sites. Stable flies are proficient fliers and can travel many miles away from developmental sites, making them even more problematic.

Since stable flies are most commonly found on the legs of cattle, there are some animal behavior signs that indicate that this is a problem pest in your herd. Animals fighting stable flies may display a variety of behaviors, including: tail flicking, skin twitching, leg stomping, standing in water, bunching in corners of the pasture and/or laying with legs tucked underneath them.

Insecticidal sprays are the most common option for controlling stable flies on range cattle. Control products include (active ingredient listed, many brand names use these ingredients): Coumaphos, Permethrin, natural pyrethrins and Phosmet. These products can be applied using a low-pressure sprayer or mist blower sprayer. Weekly applications are required to reduce fly numbers.

Another effective control strategy is to target fly resting places. In pasture settings this can be trees, windmills, fencerows or shaded areas with tall grass. On warm days, especially in the afternoon, these resting sites could be sprayed targeting the foliage, using permethrin or natural pyrethrins. Avoid spraying water tanks and water sources, and always follow label recommendations.

Stable flies impact weight gain on both pastured and confined cattle. Research conducted at the University of Nebraska saw a reduced average daily gain of 0.44 lb. in three, 84-day trials with cattle not receiving an insecticide treatment compared with cattle that did. An economic injury level of five flies per leg has been suggested and is often exceeded in normal pasture conditions. UNL has a very comprehensive livestock insect control publication that can be accessed at:

<https://entomology.unl.edu/livestock/livestockpestcontrol.pdf>