Western Beef Resource Committee *Third Edition*

Cattle Producer's Handbook

Management Section 750

Dehorning Cattle

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Horns on cattle can, and do, cause bruises and other injuries to other animals, especially during transport, handling, and in confined feeding areas. Dehorned cattle look more uniform, feed better, and bring a higher market price. Horns on adult cattle also can be a hazard to humans and equipment. Hornless cattle require less space in the feedlot and at the feed bunk. Polled breeds should be used whenever possible.

When horned breeds of cattle are selected, dehorning (removal of horns) should be performed while the cattle are young and under the supervision of experienced persons using proper techniques. Dehorning subjects animals to short-term discomfort for long-term benefits.

The goals should be to have all calves dehorned in an effective, humane manner before 3 months of age. These young calves suffer less stress because they are more easily handled, and the preferred methods cause little or no bleeding, heal quickly, and do not result in any significant setbacks. The horn buds can be removed at birth or within the first month after birth by several means, including hot cauterizing irons, cauterizing chemicals, a sharp knife, or commercially available devices.

When necessary to remove horns from older cattle, strategies aimed at minimizing pain and bleeding and prevention of infection should be employed, and a person knowledgeable and experienced in the appropriate procedures should perform the dehorning. Appropriate restraint and local anesthesia to control pain should be used when cattle older than 1 month of age are dehorned.

Cattle should be monitored for hemorrhage and infection after dehorning. Adult cattle should be dehorned only if the individuals are aggressive toward humans or other herd-mates. Producers need to be aware that dehorning may temporarily reduce nutrient intake of cattle, thus depressing growth.

Tipping of horns (removing the insensitive tip only) can be done with little impact on the well-being of individual animals. Caution must be used when tipping horns not to cut too deep and enter the vascular tissue, potentially increasing hemorrhage. Upon shipping, cattle with tipped horns experienced similar amounts of carcass bruising as non-tipped cattle.

Cattle should be dehorned on dry, cool days to allow the wounds to dry quickly with the minimum risk of infection. The best time is late afternoon, when fly activity is low. Never dehorn cattle in wet weather, because the healing rate is decreased, and the risk of infection increases.

Sanitation Precautions

Instruments used in dehorning must be kept clean, sharp, and disinfected thoroughly before each use (also see CL615). This will help prevent infected wounds and the spread of infectious diseases. Operators should also keep their hands clean. Application of antiseptics to the calf's skin before dehorning is of little benefit, unless the hair is shaved and the area scrubbed with soap several times before the antiseptic is applied.

Several disinfectants are available on the market, such as chlorhexidine (Nolvasan), Lysol, and various quaternary ammonium preparations. Each has certain advantages and disadvantages. Iodine is a skin antiseptic but is corrosive to instruments. The local veterinarian should be consulted on specific disinfectants.

Dehorning Methods

Bloodless Dehorning

The objective of these methods of dehorning is to destroy a small ring of skin encircling the horn button. Horn tissue is formed from specialized cells located in this area of skin. To be successful, these methods should be used before significant horn growth occurs.

Producers should place **caustic pastes** on the horn "button" and surrounding skin with a small applica-