KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Wildcat District

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Itchy Can Impact Your Bottom Line

Lice infections can affect the health and performance of livestock during the winter months. The USDA estimates that livestock producers lose up to $125 million annually due to lice infestations. Not only can lice cause direct animal performance losses, but they also increase wear and tear on our facilities and fences.

There are two different types of lice that infect cattle. Biting lice feed on the skin and secretions on the outside of the animal. The other type is known as sucking lice. These species are blood feeders and pierce the skin. Both types of lice spend their entire life cycles on their host. Off their host, a louse can only survive ten days or less. However, if those few days are spent in the right environment, the louse can still be transferred to an unsuspecting animal that might happen to pass by, restarting the cycle on a new host of the same species. It's important to note that lice are host species specific, so cattle lice don't infect horses or people, and vice versa.

Every herd has some level of lice infestation; they're carried from season to season by a small number of animals that act as reservoir hosts. Most females lay 1 egg per day. It only takes about twenty-eight days for an egg to mature into an adult and begin to reproduce.

The first signs of lice begin with constant rubbing and scratching within the herd. Fences, posts, water troughs, trees, and any other stationary objects can be utilized as scratching posts and may be damaged. As the infection and irritation continue, large hairless patches will become evident on animals.

There are several treatment options for lice. Pour-ons or injectables, like ivermectin, doramectin, or other macrocyclic lactones, can be used. These will treat internal parasites and work on external parasites, such as lice. It is essential to note that injectable formulations are ineffective against biting lice, as they do not feed on blood. These products are most often used on a herd at the end of summer grazing, as they transition into winter. Most formulations call for the pour-on to be applied down the topline of animals, from the poll to the tailhead. Even with herd treatment in the fall, late-season lice infections can still occur. Body shearing may be necessary to achieve effective louse control on sheep and goats. This must be done carefully, as clippers can carry the parasite from one animal to another.

Treatment will be most effective if trailers, chutes, and other areas where animals have come into contact are cleaned and treated with an appropriate premise spray. When treating herds, it's important to treat the entire group. Missing one animal could leave a reservoir for

reinfestation. The same consideration should be given to new additions to the herd from outside sources. Basic biosecurity measures, such as treating and quarantining new additions for 30 days, not only help reduce the risk of lice but also serve as a valuable tool in preventing the introduction of other diseases.

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