KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Wildcat District

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Stock Tank Maintenance Matters

As summer temperatures rise, livestock water intake increases—and water quality becomes even more important. While producers often focus on forage and feed, water remains the most important nutrient cattle consume. Clean, fresh water supports intake, performance, and overall herd health.

Research shows a clean stock tank with high-quality water promotes healthier, higher-producing livestock. Nursing calves can gain nearly nine percent more weight when the herd has access to a water trough or tank rather than getting their water directly from a pond. Livestock also prefer good-tasting water, and when water quality declines, both water and forage intake can drop. Over time, reduced intake can lead to lower gains and increased stress on animals.

Keeping stock tanks clean can be challenging, especially during the summer. Warm temperatures, direct sunlight, and nutrients from manure, slobber, leaves, and wind-blown debris create ideal conditions for algae growth. Some algae simply make water less palatable, while others, such as blue-green algae (cyanobacteria), can produce toxins that are harmful or even fatal to livestock. Dirty tanks can also harbor bacteria, parasites, and viruses that negatively affect animal health.

Limiting contamination at the tank is a good first step. Using fencing or rails to control livestock access can help reduce the amount of manure and debris entering the water. Barriers should be positioned low enough so cattle cannot slip underneath while drinking. Regularly checking tanks for leaves, foreign objects, and clogged overflows can also help prevent water-quality problems.

Most stock tanks should be drained and cleaned once or twice a year, or more often if they green up quickly. To clean, add 1-part unscented household chlorine bleach to 32 parts water, then let it sit for about 15 minutes. Drain the tank and scrub the sides and bottom thoroughly. Keep livestock away from the tank for at least 30 minutes during and after cleaning. If a tank does not have a built-in drain, turning off the water and allowing the livestock to drink it down can make cleaning more manageable.

After cleaning, several strategies can help keep tanks cleaner longer. Removing debris such as leaves and dead plant material is essential. Adding two ounces of household bleach per 50 gallons of water each week can help regulate algae growth. Another option is copper sulfate,

applied carefully at a rate of one-eighth teaspoon per 100 gallons of water. Using bleach or copper sulfate should be carefully considered. The application rate should not exceed the recommendation. And, confirm the cleaner will not react with the tank material; galvanized steel tanks may react with bleach.

Some producers choose to use goldfish for algae control. When used correctly, adding four to six goldfish per 100 gallons of tank capacity can help reduce algae. Goldfish survive best when water temperatures stay above 60 degrees and when tanks contain rocks or bricks to provide shelter from predators. Low oxygen levels, cold temperatures, and low water levels can lead to fish losses, so this method requires careful monitoring.

Tank placement also matters. Keeping troughs out of direct sunlight can significantly reduce algae growth. Shade, temporary covers, or strategic placement can help. Freeze-proof troughs, such as floating ball-top waterers, can also be beneficial, keeping water cleaner in winter and cooler in summer.

Spending a few minutes each week scouting stock tanks can pay dividends. Clean water supports intake, efficiency, and animal health.

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