

Animal Health Needs of Small Producers— “A Challenge for the Veterinary Profession”

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Introduction

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you what I see as the needs of the small-farm producers concerning animal health and how veterinarians should relate to this group.

There is a common misconception that the small producer is insignificant in agricultural production. There is substantial data concerning today's trends in agriculture such as farm size, herd size, and other characteristics of agricultural producers. While small farmers produce only a small percentage of the total food output of this nation, they remain a significant part of our food production system. About one-third of the farms in the U.S. produce 90% of the food. That means the remaining two-thirds of the farms produce about 10%. So we have thousands of small farms, most producing below their capability but at a production level they probably can sustain indefinitely. While the trend is definitely toward getting bigger or getting out, the number of small farms today is still large. Farmers with small operations hold approximately one-half of the nation's land (Appendix Table 1).

Small farmers represent a large market in terms of clients for veterinarians. There are many conflicts inherent with working with small producers. Working with a small producer can present problems, especially when both a small producer (client) with a few animals and a large producer (client) with many animals need immediate services. Economic forces drive the veterinarian to cater to the large producer who provides the bulk of his income. A large segment of our farm population, however, seldom uses a veterinarian. There are ways for the practicing food animal veterinarian to meet the needs of the small producer and do so without jeopardizing the profitability of his profession. It takes practitioners who are willing to do a little extra in order to gain a share of the small farm market.

If we examine USDA projections for the size of farms as determined by sales, we see many farms that produce less than \$20,000 in annual sales (Appendix Table 2).

If we look at just Oklahoma and Arkansas, based on a survey conducted in 1985, we can learn some important characteristics about this group of farmers. Looking at

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herd type and size, we find that in Oklahoma and Arkansas 52% of the farms have cattle herds of fewer than 40 animals (a 1-bull unit). If we add the group with herds of from 40 to 99, the percentage jumps to 79% (Appendix Table 3).

In this section of our country, and the trends hold true for most of the southern United States, we have many small herds of livestock. An important consideration in looking at characteristics of these farm operators is where they get their income. This is important because about 78% of those surveyed have full-time work off the farms (Appendix Table 4). That is why veterinarians get calls so often after 5 p.m. and in the wee hours of the night. Many of these part-time farmers go to work at 8 a.m., come home at 5 p.m., eat and then walk out among their cows; that is when they often find animal health problems. They have to decide whether to call the vet—after normal working hours—or wait until tomorrow and see if the animal is better. Sometimes they administer their own treatment. As a result, if they wait the animal probably either gets better or worse. If the animal gets worse, the producer may call a vet after it's too late to do anything about saving the animal. So the animal dies and the veterinarian sends a bill to the client. The client has learned a lesson, but not the lesson he needs to learn. He knows he now has one less animal and a vet bill. Most farmers, partly because they are part-time farmers and partly because they are just human, put off the inevitable and only call the veterinarian as a last resort. The veterinary profession needs to encourage early detection and early reporting of disease symptoms.

As mentioned before, many producers seldom use a veterinarian. One of the reasons small producers don't use veterinarians is because they don't have good cattle-handling facilities on their farms (Appendix Table 5.). Our survey found that about 70% of the farms have a headgate; however that headgate can be anything from a very good one to something very crude. Only about 45% have a squeeze chute. It is questionable whether the surrounding gathering facilities are adequate to get the animal to the squeeze chute or headgate. Facilities are important and lack of them is why many small producers have problems in animal health care.

Another problem is the variety of management systems (Appendix Table 6). Only 23% or roughly one-fourth of the farmers used a seasonal breeding program. Only 4% used artificial insemination. Most farmers would like to have a defined breeding season, but that calls for expensive fencing

and neighboring bulls that don't jump those fences. An encouraging number of farmers, 82%, observe their animals daily, but as pointed out earlier, that observation may come at an inopportune time for the veterinarian. A look at record keeping and financial management (Appendix table 7) shows that about 39% of the farmers actually keep performance records on their animals. Many record birthdates, but only 11% follow a production plan including animal health as well as other cattle management techniques.

Concerning animal health practices, about 82% of producers surveyed in Arkansas and Oklahoma vaccinate their animals for diseases and worm them at the same time (Appendix table 8). Very few weigh them, however. It is common to spray and to tag the animals when working them. Castration and dehorning were not routine practices among producers in either state.

Another important animal health consideration is obtaining replacement heifers (Appendix table 9). The survey found that about 57% of the producers raised their own replacements. One reason many small operations have fewer disease problems than their larger counterparts is because small producers purchase very few animals to add to their herds. Some people think it is better and cheaper to buy a replacement heifer rather than raise it, but producers should consider the herd health consequences.

The average age of the survey group, 54, is consistent with other census data of the general population (Appendix table 10). Most of these people had raised cattle for about 25 years. The educational level of the producers shows that over half have finished high school and about one-fourth attended college.

About 11% of those surveyed in Oklahoma belong to the Farm Bureau, 14% to the Cattlemen's Association, and about 20% to Farmers Union. In Arkansas nearly 60% belonged to Farm Bureau, 18% to the Cattlemen's Association, and 3% to Farmers Union (Appendix table 11).

An important disclosure provided by the survey was producer's sources of information about animal health. The survey found, in both Arkansas and Oklahoma, that over one-half of the producers regularly read *Progressive Farmer*. Other publications high on the list were *Farm Journal* and the *Farmer-Stockman* (Appendix table 12). Farmers look to these magazines for information on everything from forages to herd health. Veterinarians should consider using this form of communication to make producers aware of herd health issues.

Now that we know something about the characteristics of these small producers, maybe we should change the focus of veterinary training to address a cattle industry composed of many small herds. We shouldn't limit the discussion to just the cattle industry because many minor species are becoming prevalent on farms in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and throughout the rest of the South. Many part-time farmers and small farmers have good off-farm incomes. They often

use these funds to support their livestock operations. There is increasing interest in multiple species grazing, where sheep and goats grazing with cattle act as a natural herbicide to remove weeds and brush. Exotic species such as llamas, water buffalos, and ostriches—species that veterinarians have ordinarily not had to deal with—become more popular each year. This poses a challenge because of the interrelationships of many different species on the same farm. A veterinarian can focus only on so many things. Textbooks and course work don't cover some of these trends in farm management practices and livestock species so the veterinarian lacks familiarity with them. As more veterinarians come from nonfarm backgrounds, the problem becomes even more acute.

Veterinarians need better training in economics so they can determine the cost-effectiveness of different management practices. Identification of economic thresholds is not easy, nevertheless colleges of veterinary medicine need to incorporate economic analysis and decision making into their curricula.

The second challenge is that of the veterinarian's image as it relates to the course of a disease. A farmer with a sick animal waits until it is too late before he calls the vet; the animal dies and the producer has one less animal and a bill for veterinary services. After one or two of these experiences, the farmer concludes that it is better to let the animal die and not have the vet bill. A producer seldom blames himself for the death of an animal. How can a veterinarian change that producer's thinking that the animal will die regardless? Early detection and properly informed producers are solutions to this problem. Veterinarians should put themselves in the producer's shoes, look at the situation from the producer's point of view, and then decide how to change his thinking that, once sick, the animal will die.

The third challenge is learning to market veterinary services to this group of people who seldom call a vet. A veterinarian in a small community has several opportunities to teach producers about what he has to offer. Newspaper articles and news releases that give tips about livestock management practices can help producers understand that veterinarians are interested in herd health and not just dollars. Public service news releases about diseases prevalent in the area, i.e. the anaplasmosis season, are a form of information and education that also serves as a subtle advertisement of services offered. There are other approaches that veterinarians should consider. One is providing animal health articles to Extension Agents who publish monthly newsletters for the community. Since many diseases are herd and community diseases, it is important to alert the community. Practitioners available to speak at cattlemen functions, seminars at salebarns, and farm cooperative meetings increase their clientele just because they are exposed to more farmers. Unfortunately, veterinarians must work hard to win the confidence of skeptical producers, particularly small producers and low income producers. Large farmers with big investments at risk are more likely to call a vet because they usually have loans to repay and can't afford

a loss. Many small farmers are debt free and if they lose a calf, it is just lost income.

The veterinarian must also convince the producer that he will make him money or save him money rather than cost him money. Many veterinarians don't deal with this issue because they aren't adequately trained in animal nutrition and other livestock management practices. Many animal disease problems are related to the general nutrition level of the herd, the forage available, and other management considerations. A veterinarian should be a good nutritionist and be able to help the producer with that aspect of his program. This free advice, as news releases or on-site consultation, can help the farmer and not cost the veterinarian money. A veterinarian needs to know trends in the industry. He can provide assistance in selecting replacement heifers based on his estimate of calving ease as determined by pelvic measurements. The innovative veterinarian can figure out the economic traits in livestock production that are important and then search for ways to get that message across. This may involve advising the producer on how to cull cows, the relationship of age and calving weights (age of cow versus calf weaning weights), selection of good bulls, and breeding soundness. These things build the farmer's confidence in his veterinarian. The more confidence the producer has in his veterinarian, the more likely he is to believe that the veterinarian is there to help him and not just sell him vaccines and help with clinical cases.

A veterinarian must be approachable, must have those human communication skills important in any business or relationship, and must be a good listener to determine the goals and objectives of his clients.

The veterinarian is a vital part of the livestock industry. He is one of the most misunderstood individuals in the industry. In ten years of working closely with several veterinarians, particularly in brucellosis eradication, I have come to respect this profession. I hope my comments will be helpful in identifying the small producers and determining how many of them there are. Hopefully veterinarians can use these facts to improve their practices. The same information should be helpful to veterinary schools for training future veterinarians to work with all producers for a healthier livestock industry.

Appendix Table 1
Trend Projections of the Number of Farms by Size of Farm.

Size of Farm	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
1,000 Farms					
1-99 acres	1,190.4	1,060.8	945.3	842.4	750.6
100-219 acres	558.1	477.7	409.0	350.1	299.7
220-499 acres	456.3	406.0	361.3	321.5	286.1
500-999 acres	212.6	210.5	208.9	207.1	205.3
1,000-1,999 acres	96.3	99.3	102.2	105.3	108.4
2,000 acres & over	60.9	60.9	60.9	60.9	60.8
All Farms	2,574.6	2,315.4	2,087.5	1,887.2	1,711.0

Source: USDA

Appendix Table 2
Projection of Farm Size by Sales.
(Percentage)

Sales	1974	1985	1990	2000
Less than \$20,000	72	61	57	51
\$20,000-\$99,999	23	24	22	17
\$100,000-\$499,999	5	13	17	20
\$500,000 and over	—	2	4	12
All Farm	100	100	100	100

Source: USDA

Appendix Table 3
Herd Type and Size.

Size of Herd	State		Total %
	Oklahoma %	Arkansas %	
Less Than 40	56	49	52
40-99	24	30	27
100-199	12	5	8
200 and more	3	2	3
Improved	6	13	10
Total	100	100	100

Source: Socioeconomic Issues in Brucellosis Eradication; University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Winrock International, Morrilton, Arkansas; The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., Poteau, Oklahoma; September 1985.

Appendix Table 4
Type and Size of Operation.

Type and Size of Operation	State		Total %
	Oklahoma %	Arkansas %	
How much off-farm work?			
Full-time, all yr.	77	78	78
All others	23	22	22
Total	100	100	100

Source: Socioeconomic Issues in Brucellosis Eradication; University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Winrock International, Morrilton, Arkansas; The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., Poteau, Oklahoma; September 1985.

Appendix Table 5
Facilities.

Facilities	State		Total %
	Oklahoma %	Arkansas %	
Have a headgate?	69	71	70
Have a squeeze chute?	47	44	45

Source: Socioeconomic Issues in Brucellosis Eradication; University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Winrock International, Morrilton, Arkansas; The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., Poteau, Oklahoma; September 1985.

Appendix Table 6*

Herd Management Practices.

Herd Management Practices	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Use seasonal breeding?	21	25	23
Use A I?	4	5	4
How frequently observe?			
Daily	87	77	82
Weekly	5	14	9
Variable	8	9	9
Total	100	100	100

Appendix Table 7*

Record Keeping and Financial Management.

Record Keeping and Financial Management	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Keep performance records?	41	37	39
Record birthdates?	47	49	48
Have a production plan?	11	11	11

Appendix Table 8*

Animal Health Practices.

Animal Health Practices	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Practices used when work cattle (percent of those who do each)			
Vaccinate	88	76	82
Worm	82	87	85
Weigh	3	2	3
Spray	83	87	85
Tag	63	79	71
Castrate	5	8	7
Dehorn	3	9	6

Appendix Table 9*

Source of Replacement Heifers.

Source of Replacement Heifers	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Bought any replacement heifers in 1983?	18	35	27
Any of the replacements over 2 years old? (Percent "yes")	46	55	52
Isolate replacements from herd? (Percent "yes")	58	51	53
Always raise own replacements? (Percent "yes")	57	56	57
Separate cows before calving? (Percent "yes")	22	19	21

Appendix Table 10*

Personal Characteristics.

Personal Characteristics	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Age (average)	56	53	54
How long have you been raising cattle? (average)	26	24	25
Level of Education			
Attended or finished grade school	19	21	20
Some high school	14	19	16
Finished high school	32	38	35
Some college	18	12	15
Finished college	18	9	14
Total	100	100	100

Appendix Table 11*

Organizational membership and participation.

Organization	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Do you belong to: (percent of those who)			
Farm Bureau	11	57	35
Cattlemen's Assn.	14	18	16
Farmer's Union	20	3	11

Appendix Table 12

Publications read.

Publication	State		Total
	Oklahoma	Arkansas	
Do you read?			
Farm Bureau Press	3	33	18
Progressive Farmer	54	54	54
Farm Journal	20	22	20
Successful Farming	3	2	2
Drover's	6	7	6
Beef	9	11	10
Farmer's Stockman	52	3	27
Dairyman's Digest	0	3	2
Breed Magazine	11	11	11
Other	17	23	20

*Source: Socioeconomic Issues in Brucellosis Eradication; University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Winrock International, Morrilton, Arkansas; The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc., Poteau, Oklahoma; September 1985.