

Cattle Subject to Dallisgrass Staggers

Cattle producers may sometime find themselves wondering why their cattle seem to be spookier acting during late summer or in some pastures but not in others. I get asked more lately about this than I used to. One possible cause for cattle acting drunk or for being unusually flighty may be due to dallisgrass poisoning, sometime referred to as dallisgrass staggers. The condition usually occurs in late summer where large amounts of dallisgrass seedheads are present. The seedheads become infected with an ergot-like fungus. Rather than flat looking seeds on the heads, the infected heads have gray to black swellings that have a sticky sap material on them. Some observers say it looks like little popcorn. Usually not all the herd is affected, and it appears that it occurs when some animals develop a preference for the tips of the seedhead.

Symptoms, include trembling of the major muscles and the head, jerky uncoordinated movements, and spooky and sometimes aggressive behavior. The animals will startle and run, and often will fall in unusual positions. In bad cases the animals will go down, and may stay down for several days. Convulsions and death can occur in extreme cases. The symptoms are somewhat like grass tetany, and this is often misdiagnosed, but they don't show the sudden death characteristic of grass tetany, and don't immediately respond to treatment for grass tetany. There is no treatment for the malady, except to get the cattle off the affected grass, and provide them with high quality forage. If possible they should be put in a field with no ponds, steep slopes, etc. as they have been known to stumble around and end up injuring or drowning themselves. Usually cattle can completely recover from the poisoning.

If producers have kept cattle off a pasture for a while in an attempt to stockpile more forage, they may not notice the accumulation of these rank growths of dallisgrass. If one does notice large amounts of these seedheads, mowing or clipping the grass to a height of about 12 inches will help. Also, some cattlemen may notice that younger cows seem to be more affected which may mean that older cattle learn to avoid the seedheads.

Dallisgrass is becoming a more important part of many pastures in our area. It is a very good quality warm season perennial, and provides great benefits to pasture systems, but the one drawback is the potential for dallisgrass staggers. By rotational grazing the grass after seedheads emerge but before the fungus grows on them the problem can be avoided, because cattle will readily eat the immature seedheads unlike some other grasses we are used to.