



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Range and Pasture Section

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Poisonous Plants: Management and Control Recommendations

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Poisonous plants cause significant losses for the western livestock industry. Losses from livestock death and abortion exceed \$340 million annually in the 17 western states. The total impact of poisonous plants is much higher when other direct and indirect costs are considered (e.g., reduced gains, chronic illness, infertility, increased susceptibility to disease, medical costs, additional labor, herding, fencing, supplemental feed, and loss of opportunities to use forage on infested rangeland and pastures).

Some plants contain toxins that are so potent, or the toxin concentration is extremely high, that livestock are poisoned whenever the plants are grazed. Other plants are less toxic and are commonly grazed. They only cause poisoning when hungry animals are forced to consume large amounts of the plant, or during conditions that increase toxin levels or plant palatability.

Management to Prevent Poisoning

Few treatments or antidotes are available for livestock poisoned by toxic plants. Prevention lies in restricting access to poisonous plants under conditions when poisoning may occur. The following strategy will prevent most livestock poisoning from plants.

1. Identify the poisonous plants on your range or pasture. Consult your county agent, botany department herbarium, or weed identification books (e.g. "Weeds of the West").
2. Learn the signs and symptoms of poisoning for each poisonous plant.
3. Learn when these plants are most toxic.
4. Know when livestock are most likely to eat these plants.
5. Understand the environmental or management conditions under which poisoning may occur.
6. Devise grazing strategies that will restrict access to plants when they are likely to cause poisoning.

Other general management considerations to reduce the risk of poisoning:

1. Do not turn hungry livestock onto areas infested with poisonous plants. Hunger causes animals to eat plants they will normally avoid.
 - Ensure adequate forage is always available.
 - Do not overgraze a pasture.
 - Remove livestock when properly using the range.
2. Do not turn out too early in the spring. Many poisonous plants start growth early and are consumed before desirable grasses are available.
3. Supplement livestock with salt and minerals to maintain animal health and avoid craving for minerals.
4. Cautiously introduce animals to poisonous plant-infested areas. Feed animals before moving into infested pastures. New, inexperienced animals should be watched closely.
5. Use the range or pasture when poisonous plants are least toxic. Toxin concentration is generally highest in early growth and again when the plant flowers and sets seed.
6. Graze the kind and class of animal that is least affected by particular poisonous plants when possible.
7. Maintain range in good condition to minimize invasion or increase of noxious and poisonous weeds.
8. Control poisonous plants if livestock losses are severe enough to justify the cost of treatment. Selective herbicides are available for control of most poisonous plants. Consult your county agent for state and local recommendations and label requirements. Biological control may be helpful in keeping some exotic poisonous plants in check. Plowing and seeding improved forages may be feasible in suitable areas.
9. Consult with your veterinarian for specific treatment of poisoned animals.