



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Animal Health Section

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Evaluating Dead Cattle: A Necropsy Guide for the Cow-Calf Operation

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Necropsy is an invaluable tool for identifying disease and management problems but is often used hesitantly—perhaps not until after several animals have died. Necropsies tend to be used only when a problem is “out of the ordinary!” The thinking might be that you expect one or two to die once in a while. When the fourth one “bites the dust” you begin to kick yourself for not checking the others.

Cattle producers and veterinarians, working together using necropsy “carcass data,” can better monitor the dynamic processes of the health maintenance programs of the production unit to maximize the cost: benefits of all inputs. One way or another you need to know why each and every animal died—be it hit by a car, bullet, or disease. Necropsy often yields more information than just the cause of death (e.g., body condition can be an indicator of the general management program).

Cow-calf operators often find themselves at a disadvantage in that their animals are in “distant pastures” and necropsies of dead animals on a cow-calf unit are more likely to be conducted sporadically or some time after death. Veterinarians realize the value of necropsy “carcass data” obtained **at the time of death** although they may be unable to respond to the immediate needs of each client. A rancher can be of assistance to the veterinarian by being able to conduct a necropsy; therefore, many veterinarians train their clients to perform a basic necropsy as part of the overall management program. [**Note:** Delays in conducting a necropsy decreases the diagnostic value of the procedure!]

The objective of the necropsy is to determine the presence of abnormalities that may identify the cause of the death. A routine method of examining and evaluating the animal's carcass is helpful to you and your veterinarian in monitoring and refining production programs. A standard approach to selecting specimens also is helpful to your veterinarian to maximize a diagnostic laboratory service. Consult with your veterinarian for proper preparation and submission of specimens. Many diagnostic laboratories will accept specimens only through a veterinarian.

Materials Required

The materials used to conduct a field necropsy are few, simple, and can be carried in a “saddle bag” (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Necropsy equipment.