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NEWS

More than 2,000 Kansas cattle die in 'perfect storm' of high temperatures, humidity and no wind



Alice Mannette

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Excessive heat is killing cattle in Kansas. According to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, more than 2,000 cattle died in Kansas in the past few days.

Matthew Lara, a spokesperson for the KDHE, said this number will probably increase, but he said, "The majority of the event happened over the weekend."

"Not all the deaths are reported to us," Lara said.

KDHE is notified if the location needs help disposing of bodies.

Although Lara said most of the deaths occurred in southwest Kansas, he is unable to pinpoint whether the majority of the animals came from feedlots or ranches.

Severe temperature, no winds, is rare but deadly occurrence

The event that happened last weekend through early this week was rare, said A.J. Tarpoff, a beef extension veterinarian with Kansas State University.

"The impacts of this will be equivalent to a blizzard or an ice storm ... or even a tornado," he said. "It was kind of a perfect storm."

Not only were there relatively high temperatures, but there also was a large spike in temperature and humidity. In addition, wind speed dropped.

"So when cattle accumulate heat load and have heat stress, it's temperature, humidity, wind speed and solar radiation that all play a key role," Tarpoff said. "Thankfully, it's a rare event."

Tarpoff said this was the first "big heat event" of the year and some animals may not have shed all of their winter hair.

"Out in the western Kansas area, there was that area that saw a 10- to 14-degree increase in temperature from that Friday to Saturday — kind of almost overnight, and the humidity increased pretty rapidly," said Scarlett Hagins, vice president of communications for the Kansas Livestock Association. "They saw very little wind and they weren't cooling off at night."

Because the sudden increase in temperature and decrease in wind happened simultaneously, the animals didn't have any time to acclimate.

"In a very short time frame, this caused some cattle to succumb to heat stress," Hagins said.

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Keeping cattle in the pasture with shade and lots of water

Southwest cattle rancher Bradon Wiens said most of the deaths he heard about were in the feedlots. He said a feedlot close to him last week brought in cattle from Montana.

"(The owner) had to call the fire department to come spray them off because they were starting to go down because they were, being from Montana, unaccustomed to the heat," Wiens said.

As for Wiens, who raises Wagyu and Black Angus, he said both breeds are doing fine, especially the Wagyu.

Wiens raises his cattle on pasture and has a few trees and lean-tos for shade. He also has some running water in his pastures.

"If they have trees and fresh running water, then they're going to be doing OK," Wiens said.

Pretty Prairie rancher Chad Basinger, of Basinger's Beef, said he is keeping his fatter cattle near his home, with buckets of water nearby as heavier cattle will drink more. Like Wiens, the rest of his cattle are on native grass or cover crops. He said all his pastures have either ponds or creeks and some shade.

The cattle are like humans, Basinger said, they eat less in the heat and usually drink more.

"In the winter when it's cold, they'll eat more just to keep their body temperature up," he said. "So when it's real hot, they don't eat as much."

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How to take care of cattle in the Kansas heat

Hagins, of the Kansas Livestock Association, said heat stress isn't unusual during the summer.

"It's always a concern this time of year and something that cattle feeders always work to mitigate," she said.

They bring out extra water and, she said, often they will alter their feeding schedules so that cattle aren't digesting their food during the heat of the day because digestion increases the temperature in cattle.

They usually feed during the cooler parts of the day, sometimes changing diets and putting on sprinklers.

"Sometimes they may change their ration, so it's not as high energy because again, that increases heat in cattle," she said. "(They try to) keep those cattle as cool as possible."

Animals with preexisting conditions are the most at risk, as are animals that are larger.

"For our pasture-based system and our ranchers, it's really important that when times get tough like this and we have these heat loads to provide water, water, water and more water," said Tarpoff, the K-State veterinarian. "Their water intake needs, even for pasture cattle, goes up pretty dramatically during the heat load events."

Kansas, with 6.5 million head of cattle, is the third largest cattle state in the U.S., behind Texas and Nebraska. Texas has more 12.7 million and Nebraska has 6.8 million.

