



Beware of Bloat!

By Jackie Nix, Animal Nutritionist

This year's drought has resulted in shorter pastures than usual in Louisiana. A fortunate side effect has been an abundance of native clover that is thriving due to lack of shading and competition. This windfall of high quality forages is good news for Louisiana cattle producers with limited forage options for the winter. However, rapid, lush clover growth is ideal for development of frothy (a.k.a. pasture) bloat. This article is intended to inform you about dangers of this type of bloat and what you can do to protect your cattle investment.

What is Frothy Bloat?

Bloat is a condition in ruminants (cattle, sheep and goats) that is marked by abdominal distention due to accumulated gas in the rumen. These gases are the normal by-product of digestion of feeds in the rumen and are usually harmlessly belched out by the animal. When the animal is unable to belch, bloat results. Left untreated, the gasses compress the heart and lungs and can result in death.

Frothy bloat (also known as pasture or legume bloat) is most often associated with ruminants grazing lush, immature, legume pastures (alfalfa or clover) or cereal grain pastures (wheat, oats or rye); however, animals fed high quality legume hay may also be susceptible. In frothy bloat, the gases mix with rumen contents to form very stable foam. Plant proteins are the primary foaming agent in the rumen contents. Because the gas is trapped in thousands of bubbles it is impossible for the animal to eructate or belch to release the gas. It is also impossible to simply release the gas with a stomach tube or trocar as with other types of bloat. Frothy bloat develops very quickly and often your first indication of trouble will be a dead or dying animal.

The signs of bloat are obvious. A marked distention of the rumen on the left side of the animal (see Figure 1) appears suddenly. As bloat progresses, the skin over the left flank becomes more and more taut and cannot be pinched or "tented". Difficulty in breathing will occur with grunting, breathing through an open mouth, tongue protrusion and a dropped head. In severe cases, death can occur in as little as a half hour from the onset of symptoms.

The Costs of Bloat

Due to the rapid growth of clover under ideal conditions, a cattle producer can literally wake up one morning to dead cattle. Death losses of 1 to 5% are common during frothy bloat conditions and can go as high as 10 to 20% in severe outbreaks. Even sub-acute cases of frothy bloat are costly to cattle producers. The discomfort caused by mild bloat, will cause cattle to eat and drink less (much like human indigestion), resulting in lowered production. Large aggressive feeders will be most susceptible.

Treating Bloat

Since the gas in frothy bloat is trapped in foam, it is necessary to introduce an antifoaming agent into the rumen. This is usually done through a stomach tube in severe cases. Because it is extremely easy to mistakenly pass a stomach tube into the lungs, inexperienced producers should call a veterinarian to perform this procedure. Some common antifoaming agents are poloxalene

(Bloat Guard[®]), vegetable oils and mineral oils. Bloat Guard[®] is the only FDA-approved medicant approved for prevention of frothy bloat in cattle. Bloat Guard[®] reduces the surface tension in the walls of the bubbles so that they can combine with other bubbles and burst, thus releasing the gas.

Prevention of Bloat

Because frothy bloat can cause death without warning, prevention is key for risk management. There are several management strategies that you can implement to help reduce the incidence of pasture bloat. These include:

1. Do not turn hungry cattle out on fresh clover pastures.
2. Fill cattle up on hay prior to turning out on lush, clover pastures.
3. Do not graze lush pastures that are wet from dew or rain.
4. Provide coarse hay at all times when cattle move to a new pasture.
5. Feed Sweetlix[®] Bloat Guard[®] Pressed Blocks as a preventative against bloat

Safely Utilize High Quality Clover Without Worry

In summary, current conditions are right for frothy bloat for many Louisiana cattle producers. Bloat can be deadly and even mild cases result in production losses. Because onset of bloat is rapid, preventative measures are the best course of action. Sweetlix[®] Bloat Guard[®] Pressed Blocks provide an easy, reliable method to deliver protective amounts of poloxalene on a daily basis. Only Sweetlix[®] manufactures Bloat Guard[®] in a free choice block form. When used in conjunction with other preventative management practices, cattle producers can safely utilize these bountiful clover pastures without worry or loss. For additional information about Sweetlix[®] Bloat Guard[®] Pressed Blocks or how they can be utilized in your production system, please visit www.sweetlix.com or call 1-87SWEETLIX.

Jackie Nix is a nutritionist with Sweetlix[®] (<http://www.sweetlix.com>). You can contact her at jnix@sweetlix.com or 1-800-325-1486 for questions or to learn more about the Sweetlix[®] line of mineral and protein supplements for cattle, goats, horses, sheep and wildlife.

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FIGURE 1. This calf is exhibiting bloat. Note the distension of the rumen on the animal's left side.

