Preventative care: An investment in herd health

MANHATTAN -- From protecting livestock investments to keeping rural veterinary clinics operating, making sound business decisions is an important part of animal agriculture.

In a recent episode of the Beef Cattle Institute's Cattle Chat podcast, Kansas State University veterinarians welcomed Oklahoma veterinarian Rebekah Hartfield to discuss the role of preventative herd health, business management and the future of rural veterinary medicine.

Hartfield, who owns three veterinary practices in Oklahoma, shared how preventative measures, such as vaccinations and breeding soundness exams, can help producers avoid costly animal health and reproductive problems.

For smaller cattle operations, where each animal represents a significant investment, those decisions can have an even greater financial impact.

"What I see on my end is I have these small producers that come in, and they may not do any kind of preventative vaccine or even breeding soundness exams in their bulls," Hartfield said. "When they do come to me because they didn't do some of that preventative herd health, now they have issues with their bull. They have 20 open cows, and they're wondering why they don't have any calves. But if we could have done that breeding soundness exam when they were supposed to, we could have prevented all that."

The conversation also explored the value of approaching veterinary medicine and livestock production with a business mindset. Hartfield explained how understanding expenses and comparing the costs of preventative care with potential losses can help producers make more informed decisions.

K-State agricultural economist Dustin Pendell encouraged producers to begin tracking a few key expenses or performance measures rather than trying to record everything at once.

"You've just got to start somewhere," Pendell said. "Pick five different things you're going to record, or ten different things you're going to record. Whether it's a spreadsheet or some other software, you've got to start somewhere."

Beyond profitability, the veterinarians discussed the challenges of recruiting and retaining rural practitioners.

Hartfield said she is working to encourage the next generation of veterinarians through mentorship, hands-on opportunities and a children's book series she authored. The books

follow a young girl named Abby and her veterinarian mentor, Dr. H, as they diagnose and treat different animals, introducing young readers to animal care and veterinary medicine.

Through these stories, Hartfield hopes to spark an early interest in the profession and encourage more young people to consider careers in rural veterinary medicine.

She also emphasized the importance of creating sustainable rural practices that provide quality veterinary care while offering employees opportunities for professional growth and work-life balance.

“I want to help these kids. I want to help in paying for their vet school. I want them to come work for me after school,” Hartfield said. “I think just investing in these kids at an early age is key, and getting them to come back either to their local town where they grew up or someone like me who's pulling them in and saying, ‘Hey, this is a good thing here.’”

The full discussion is available on the Beef Cattle Institute’s Cattle Chat podcast. Send questions by email to bci@ksu.edu.

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