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Spring cattle work calls for COVID-19 precautions

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While cattle still require care, ranchers should practice social distancing and other safety precautions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has much of the California population staying home in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus. Across the state, many grocery stores have had shelves emptied of food and other day-to-day necessities as people have stockpiled these essentials. Bob Moller, a rancher in Shasta County, recalled this was similar to the grocery stores in 1945, when noted items were out of stock or customers were limited to the number of items they were allowed to purchase. For ranchers like Moller, whose cattle depend on him for food and care, working from home isn't an option, but there are steps they can take to reduce the risk.

Agriculture workers are considered “essential” and are allowed to tend crops and care for livestock. Beef cattle ranching differs from more intensive agriculture production as much of the work (fixing fence, feeding, checking cattle) is generally a solitary activity. This changes as spring work commences. While the kind of work may differ between ranches with spring calving cows and fall calving cows, establishing and following some simple protocols should reduce the risk of contracting and spreading

COVID-19. Though many people working cattle are not in the high-risk category, many are, and future contact with someone who is high risk will be inevitable so precaution is necessary.

We recommend keeping the following in mind to reduce risk of spreading COVID-19:

1. Maintain the Centers for Disease Control Social Distancing recommendation of six feet. This might mean:

- Taking separate vehicles to the work site
- Requiring that the chute operator conduct all the work associated with the animal in the chute (shots, tags, etc).
- Developing a system to bring cattle to the chute such that the crew maintains at least this distance.
- Branding crews might need to change the process up with just one person throwing the calf and changing the ropes and only one person conducting their assigned task at the calf at a time. Crews should adhere to social distancing while waiting to conduct their task.

2. Tools and Equipment

- When a task is assigned to someone, provide them with the equipment to do the task (syringe, eartagger, etc). Have them wipe the tool down with a disinfectant. For syringes, just wipe the syringe handle--do not spray alcohol or something else on the vial. Do not expose modified live vaccines to disinfectants as they may inactivate the vaccine. Let the person assigned to the task do the job—resist the urge to ear tag the animal while they are refilling the syringe. The tool needs to be in their control.
- Provide plenty of hand sanitizer and wipes to disinfect equipment and tools and/or wear gloves. Also remind everyone to not touch their face when working in a group.
- Consider avoiding meals together. It might be better to give the crew a gift card for takeout.

3. Limit the number of people participating

- The virus spreads readily through community contact. To reduce the possibility of spread, knowing who the crew is and having an idea of who they have been in contact with should help. If at all possible, try to work with people who are not a high risk for the virus.

The authors recognize that not all of these ideas will be possible to enact all the time, however, we urge beef cattle producers to consider the severity of this pandemic and their importance as food producers as they plan their spring livestock work.

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