

Dealing with animal health risks following flooding

Lee Taylor BVSc (Hons 1) MVetSc MANZCVS, Veterinary Operations, Zoetis.

Heavy monsoonal rainfall coupled with strong winds and subsequent flooding can result in stock losses due to drowning, bogging and hypothermia. For those stock that survive the immediate impacts, the provision of clean drinking water and sufficient fodder is a priority.

Once these immediate requirements are met, producers need to be mindful of the serious animal health risks that flooding events can precipitate. Access to facilities that allow stock to be assessed and treated often limits treatment options, but careful observation of stock may allow you to pick up problems early and prevent further losses.

Some of the immediate and longer-term health risks to cattle from flooding include:

- Bovine respiratory disease (BRD) – mixing of cattle from different properties, confinement on small areas of land combined with the stress of hypothermia, unfamiliar stock, lack of food and confinement can result in cattle developing pneumonia. Recognising the signs in affected cattle and differentiating them from other causes of fever and sickness (see below) is the first step in managing the problem.
- Mastitis – wet, muddy conditions favour the spread of bacteria capable of causing mastitis. While mostly a disease of dairy cattle, beef cattle may also be affected if held in wet, boggy areas while lactating.
- Foot/leg disease and injury, e.g. foot rot, sole diseases, swollen legs (cellulitis).
- Skin problems such as rain scald.
- Buffalo fly and other biting flies such as stable fly and mosquito worry.
- 3-Day Sickness (BEF) – flood waters and warm weather provide an ideal environment for mosquitoes, the main insect vector of this virus. Treatment of affected stock with anti-inflammatory drugs can assist with their recovery.
- Tick fever – In the tick endemic regions, mixing of cattle from different properties coupled with ideal conditions for ticks to breed increases the risk of tick fever outbreaks.
- Note that tick fever, 3-day sickness and BRD are easily confused in the early stages of illness where a high fever is often the only presenting sign.
- Leptospirosis – leptospire can persist in wet environments for prolonged periods. Water also facilitates the spread of leptospire and entry of the leptospire into new host animals. Therefore, the likelihood of infection with Lepto increases during periods of high rainfall or flooding.
- Clostridial diseases including blackleg and malignant oedema are known to occur at increased frequency following flood events.
- Botulism – Exposure of stock to carcasses and contamination of drinking water with dead animals killed in floodwaters can increase the risk of botulism after flooding.
- Plant toxicities. A range of plant toxicities are a risk following heavy rainfall and flooding.
- Worms. Confinement of stock on small areas of high ground with short green pick increases exposure of cattle to worms.

For producers who also run sheep:

- Foot disease, e.g. foot abscess, foot rot
- “Epi” (Eperythrozoonosis)
- Clostridial diseases (as for cattle)
- Fly strike

- Fleece rot
- Worms. As for cattle.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Working with your veterinarian may allow you to save many flood-affected stock and be ready for challenges when floodwaters subside. Your veterinarian can assist you in figuring out what is really going on and ensure your animals receive the right treatments.

Zoetis are working with veterinarians in flood affected areas to provide veterinary products for treating stock affected by flooding at no charge. Work with your vet to access appropriate treatments for your animals.



Lee Taylor is a senior livestock veterinarian with Zoetis where he has worked for the past 19 years. Since graduating from the University of Queensland in 1988, Lee has worked in private veterinary practice, completed a Masters degree at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada and worked as a government veterinary officer in central Queensland.