

Parasites - The Bug On Farm Income

by Gary Martin

Freeloading insects and worms that reside in cattle and poultry create a billion dollar loophole in this country's meat production and farmers are fighting an uphill battle just to hold their own against these often unseen pests.

One test in Georgia showed farmers there averaged \$1,668 a year in losses due to sickness and death inflicted by parasites among their animals. The U. S. Department of Agriculture estimates that parasites in farm animals cost farmers in the United States between \$750 million and \$1 billion a year.

Much of the financial loss is absorbed by the farmers and ranchers themselves, but if they are to remain in the business of meat production, they must realize a profit in spite of parasites. The logical result is a higher cost for meat in the store.

Because the farmer can not demand a pay raise every time he treats his animals for parasites, it is difficult to tell exactly how this factor affects meat prices in the grocery store. But, according to a recent study of the parasite problem by Sperry New Holland, it nevertheless remains a constant and major operational expense for every farmer and poultryman in the country.

Other costs in the war against animal parasites are easier to define. The public pays millions of dollars each year in taxes to help control parasites on the farm. The U. S. Agricultural Research Service has an annual budget of \$2.3 million with which they operate four laboratories. One is devoted to the study of tiny blood parasites, another to sheep and poultry parasites, the third to worms in cattle and the fourth to worms and trichina larvae in swine.

In addition to research, the government spends millions more to contain and eradicate diseases when severe outbreaks threaten neighboring animals or even the entire livestock industry.

An example of this is the control of the dreaded exotic Newcastle disease in poultry. This disease, which can be carried by insects, rats, birds or even the wind and humans, almost always ends in death to the entire infected flock. Exotic Newcastle flared up in parts of southern California last year. Government veterinarians immediately moved in. Infected

flocks had to be destroyed, others quarantined. Farmers received indemnity from the government when their flocks were destroyed. It took months to bring the disease under control, but probably saved the nation's entire poultry industry.

Much of what the government does to prevent and control parasites in animals is done to save that segment of agriculture involved. But swift action against some parasites also results in stopping the spread of a disease to humans.

Probably the best known human disease carried by a parasite by way of farm animals is Rocky Mountain spotted fever spread by ticks. In India the bubonic plague is spread by the rat flea. On animals, mange is often contracted from mites.

Lice, fleas, and mites are the common external parasites found on swine and cattle. They are joined by a variety of tapeworms, round worms, blowflies and screwworms, some of which actually raise their offspring in the living flesh of the infected animal.

While round worms, such as are common in house pets, live in the animal's intestinal track, some parasites, like protozoa,

are very small and make themselves at home in the blood.

Farm animals carrying parasites almost always show it. They become thin, they scratch, cough, and sometimes get a fever or become violently ill. The economic effect to the farmer is even more noticeable. Pigs infected with round worms can require an extra 100 pounds or more of feed to reach market weight, according to Dr. Charles Dobbins Jr., head of the University of Georgia, veterinary staff.

Some meat packing plants regularly condemn 40 to 50 percent of the livers they receive as the result of stomach worm and kidney worm damage, Dr. Dobbins said.

The federal government last year spent \$193 million on marketing and food inspection; an expensive, taxpayer financed buffer against the ever present dangers of bad food reaching the consumer.

Researchers at Sperry New Holland, the world's largest manufacturer of hay and forage machines, say good nutrition in animal diets can help fight off parasites. The researchers encourage farmers to have their forage tested and adjust their

animals' rations accordingly. One method sometimes recommended for keeping cattle from overgrazing is green feeding with the use of a crop chopper. This machine cuts and chops grass and other forage crops which are then taken to the barn and fed to cattle. This eliminates the danger of cattle

grazing on parasite infested ground.

A University of Wisconsin parasitologist, A. C. Todd, reported that a recent nationwide survey of the top hog producing counties in the U. S. discovered parasites in every herd studied.

Some specialists say about 80 percent of all U. S. cattle harbor

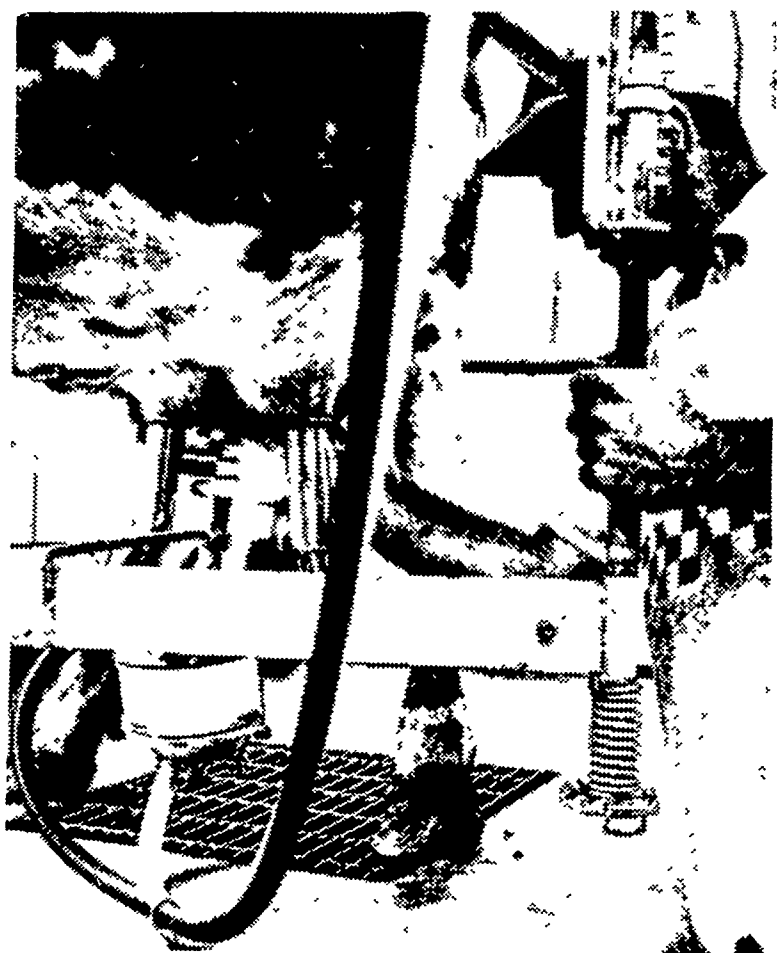
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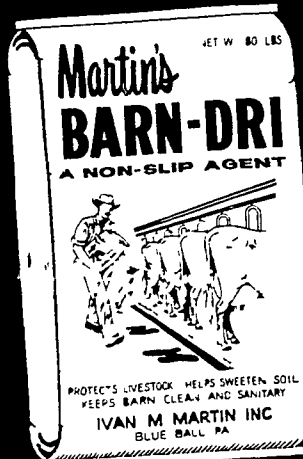
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