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REDUCE THE EARLY SEASON FLY THREAT

As the weather warms up, so do farm fly populations and it's important to make sure your stock are well protected. While cattle are at grass it's generally time to get on with other jobs around the farm – the animals may not be attracting your attention, but they will be interesting the local fly population!

David Thornton from Rumenco highlights the new season summer fly threat and how to minimise the problems these irritating disease vectors can cause on your farm.

It may have been a long, cold winter – and no-one in the Scottish Borders and North of England would argue about that – but it's a myth that prolonged freezing temperatures kill off over-wintering fly populations. Entomologists tell us that they can survive deep in the soil and, in any case, heavy snow cover actually protects many flying insects from the extreme cold temperatures.

What's more, the cold winter was followed by a warm and sunny March, which has accelerated some fly cycles. At the time of writing, scientists says the 2011 fly season is already 2-3 weeks ahead of where it usually is. This means that by the time you are reading this, fly populations are probably well established and enjoying plenty of meals on your livestock!

Flies and midges that affect livestock are not only a nuisance and irritation to the animal, depressing performance, they can also transmit diseases. And with the emergence of bluetongue in recent years, we have become only too aware of the potential threat from these air-borne vectors.

As the weather warms up, there are two main groups of flies which cause problems for cattle producers: flies which bite and feed on blood; and flies which feed on the secretions from the eyes, nose, udder and the sweat on the animal's coat and skin.

Within the two groups there are a number of different types of flies, some of which transmit disease, and others which are just a plain nuisance, but still distract the cow from feeding.

Control of flies around your livestock involves a combination of applying insecticides directly onto the animal, feeding garlic-based supplements which create an invisible odour barrier around animals to deter flies from landing, and cleaning up potential breeding sites.

Understanding how your own farm appeals to flies is an important step forward in better fly control. In fact, knowing where and when flies are breeding and then taking action to restrict the potential farm fly population is just as important as controlling flies on or around the animals.

Flies prefer damp, sheltered areas where they are protected from the wind and can find shade during the heat of the day. So if your stock are susceptible to summer mastitis or New Forest Eye disease, for example – which are transmitted by the head and face flies respectively – dry cows and maiden heifers particularly should be grazed on fields away from trees and water courses.

Most of the flies that bite cattle breed in dung or decomposing vegetable matter, and near water, so it is important to ensure their proliferation opportunities are as limited as possible by eliminating breeding hotspots around the farm – or keeping livestock well away from water – and good hygiene. And it's a good idea to remove soiled bedding, spilled feed and silage at least once a week.

Stored manure should be kept as dry and compacted as possible and it is important not to overfill lagoons and to keep the free from floating solids. Improving ventilation to reduce humidity and lower temperatures will also create less favourable breeding conditions for flies. On the dairy farm, increasing air movement with fans or creating a water spray barrier at the entrance to parlours will also reduce stable fly nuisance and milking time. Keeping walls clean and bins empty will also discourage flies from the parlour.

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In a box:

Feeding garlic to deter flies

Special nutrition supplements can help keep livestock free from flies. A number of studies have shown that the oil fraction of garlic can be effective against a wide range of insects. After ingestion, garlic creates an invisible odour barrier around animals. In addition, garlic has documented activity as an antibiotic and antiviral agent, helping to further protect livestock.

Two products from Rumenco can help control the summer fly threat to livestock. Supalyx Garlic buckets and Rumevite Garlic blocks have both been formulated as summer grazing mineral supplements, but also incorporate the sought after fly repellent benefits of this valuable member of the onion family.

After a few days, cattle offered these supplements will start to emit the strong garlic compounds through their skin. The strong smell can confuse flies and make it harder for them to seek out their next blood meal!

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[Picture of David Thornton]:

David Thornton has been with Rumenco for 30 years. He is a respected nutritionist and has helped many beef, dairy and sheep producers maximise the value of home grown forages through cost-effective supplementary feeding of Rumevite feedblocks, Supalyx and Lifeline buckets and the wider range of Rumenco feed products.