

## Livestock deaths on the farm: How to troubleshoot livestock production problems

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As the manager of an animal unit in the recent past, one day I came to work on a Monday to be confronted by a manager's worst nightmare: 3 goats dead, 2 sheep dead, 3 seriously ill. What happened? I had left Friday with everything looking well. Over the weekend, the worker on duty had not seen anything amiss. Now this! What could have happened?

I scratched my head. We were a stand-alone unit, cut off from other animals. Whatever caused those sudden deaths must have come from within. Sabotage? Acute disease? I set out to investigate...

If you are a livestock farmer or an extension worker or animal manager, sometimes you are called upon to troubleshoot a production-related or health-related complaint. Where do you start?

For a start, it is always important to know the **history**. Every problem has a history, and if the history is understood, most problems become more understood.

The first rule is: know the questions to ask! Animals cannot speak; hence we need to pay attention to the spoken (and unspoken!) testimonies of the animal attendants.

Some questions to ask

Always the first question would: what sort of changes have happened in the last few days, weeks or months (depending on the problem). Specifically ask the following:

- 1). Have any new animals been added to the herd in the recent past? (A history of animal movement).
- 2). Any extraordinary occurrence (for example animals breaking into the feed shed?) (Sudden/accidental happenings).
- 3). Have you introduced any new feed to the animals? Where did the feed come from? (A history of feeds and feeding)
- 4). Have you introduced any new bedding materials? ( A history of management routines)
- 5). Have there been any changes to animal accommodation, paddocks etc
- 6). Have there been any sudden changes in the weather in the recent past? (Heavy rains; heat waves; extreme colds all precipitate diseases).

Having established the history, you need to look at the **physical environment**.

This is the part of the problem-shooting exercise that most people ignore. Most of the time, the CAUSE of the problem is right in front of you-only sometimes you may not know WHAT to look for!

Look for the obvious things: can you see anything out of the ordinary around? Old lead batteries; unsecured chemical/fertiliser sheds; left-over feed (great clue); overgrazed pastures (an important clue!); nervous stockman (guilty-they know they did something they should not have done, maybe?); open gates that should be closed (investigate a little bit-cover ups are common!).

Finally, look at the **animals**. What are the signs? How many are dead? How many are sick? Of the dead, what are the post mortem signs? (Clinical examination and post mortem examination).

When confronted with dead or sick animals, most people want to look for signs that correspond to diseases they know. Not a good strategy. Diseases don't read books, so your expectations may not be how the disease will present! It is good to KNOW how the common diseases present, because sometimes it is just as easy as ABC. But most of the time it is not so clear-cut, hence it is necessary to take all the steps!

In my case, the first thing that I did was: I went to see the dead animals. I could see signs of diarrhoea (soiled back); severe dehydration; and the affected were weak and lying down. What was it?

One thing that I saw that was deadly amiss: the gate to one of the pens where they were not supposed to access was open! One of the animals was dead right inside that pen! We kept geese on the other part of the unit, which we sometimes fed on leftover sadza (maize porridge). In this case, I pieced together the fact that on the Friday, one of the workers had put sadza in the geese compartment, which somehow the sheep and goats had accessed. Actually the problem was they had put a LOT of leftover sadza with lots of soup, and in high temperatures: perfect conditions for bacterial culture. The geese could not possibly finish all of it, and on the Monday, I came across the incriminating evidence! It was right there in front of my eyes.

The Monday disaster was the culmination of certain changes in the routine of the unit. To me it was a clear case of food poison (ingesting pre-formed toxins). However, when we took the animals to a clinic for post mortem, the results were surprising...

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