After a long day at work a rancher comes home to check his herd just as he does every evening. This particular day he finds a cow that is lying down and cannot get up. After several repeated attempts the producer cannot make the cow stand. Though she is in good condition and does not seem distressed it is apparent that something is not quite right. Like many producers in our area have been faced with recently, this producer is now responsible for managing what is referred to as a "downer cow". Identifying specifically what type of downer she is, coupled with appropriate and timely treatment, will determine how successful the producer will be at saving the cow. Additionally, understanding the cause in depth not only helps a producer develop a treatment plan, but may help him prevent the occurrence of having a downer cow altogether.

Instances of dystocia, or difficulty calving, are most prevalent in younger females due to their smaller pelvic size, and lack of calving experience. If not tended to accurately, a case of dystocia may quickly evolve into a downer cow situation. Cows with dystocia that have gone down have likely done so due to obturator paralysis. The obturator nerve runs along each side of the pelvic cavity. If an extended amount of pressure is placed on this nerve, paralysis may occur. This is common in females that have a calf that is hip-locked during the calving process. Special care is required immediately following calving to ensure that obturator paralysis does not permanently affect a female. For this reason, it is wise to keep a close watch on your females during calving season in order to reduce the occurrence of dystocia altogether. For more on obturator paralysis, please refer to our "Downer Cow Management" article which can be found in the Herd Health 2012 tab on our website.

The second type of downer cow is the type previously mentioned in which the female appears to be in good body condition and not distressed. This cow likely appeared normal the previous day, and did not show any signs of illness. This usually occurs in adult females that are in the stages of production anywhere between the last trimester of pregnancy and two weeks post-partum. Cows in this category are likely down because they are experiencing some level of mineral deficiency. This is caused by the increase in requirements to sustain pregnancy and adequate lactation. Common mineral deficiencies are Calcium, Magnesium, Phosphorus, or a combination of all three. If she is not treated quickly this mineral deficiency may prove to be fatal. Producers typically do not experience many cases of downer cows from nutrition when cattle have access to plenty of green forages. This is because these forages usually contain enough minerals to meet the cows' requirements, whereas hay alone may not fulfill the requirements. Although green forage consumption is helpful in preventing these mineral deficiencies, an extremely effective source of prevention is to ensure that your cattle are consuming adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals.

As with many issues, it is often easier to prevent something from occurring than it is to repair what was destroyed. This is true when referring to downer cattle as well. With cattle prices as high as they are it is best to take every precaution necessary to maintain good health of your cattle so that they can return the highest income possible. Closely watch your cattle and act immediately if you have a downer cow. If you would like further assistance with developing a method to prevent the occurrence of downer cattle in your herd, please contact us.