

Horn Fly Control

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Spring is upon us. As we walk through pastures, making sure to keep a good distance between us and the backends of cattle grazing knee-high ryegrass, we start to notice tiny black clouds of flies moving with the cows across the field. Horn flies. Horn flies are the most economically important pest of cattle in Alabama. Research shows that calves can weigh 25-50lb less at weaning when no horn fly control is used after economic threshold (200 flies/animal) is reached. As cattlemen, we get paid by the pound, and 25-50lbs/calf can have a huge impact on our pocketbooks.

So, what options do you have for control? There are many products labeled for horn fly control, coming in a variety of delivery methods: sprays, drenches, dusts, ear tags, and feed throughs. Sprays, drenches, and dusts will provide only temporary relief to cattle and require multiple applications throughout the season. Feed through products are available that contain insecticides that pass through the cow's digestive system, targeting the immature horn flies developing in manure. These products require consistent intake to be successful, and the herd will still be susceptible to adult horn flies moving in from surrounding herds. Fly tags have become a widely used method of horn fly control, however, they need to be used correctly to achieve the desired level of control and to avoid resistance development.

Tips for effective use of fly tags:

- Wait to apply tags until you have reached 200 flies/animal. Applying tags too early will decrease their effectiveness later, during the peak of horn fly season.
- Follow the label rates. Most fly tags call for 2 tags per mature animal. Using lower than the label rate will not save you money, it will increase resistance to the horn fly population.
- Remove fly tags at the end of the season or when they stop being effective. Keeping fly tags in longer exposes horn flies to lower insecticide doses, leading to resistance.
- Rotate between classes of insecticide (not brand names of tags) each year. See the chart below on how to properly rotate insecticide classes.

Insecticide Classes			
Brand Names	Organophosphates	Pyrethroids	Avermectins
	Patriot	PYthon	XP 820
	Warrior	PYthon Magnum	
	Optimizer	Gardstar Plus	
	Dominator	CyLence Ultra	
	Corathon	Saber Extra	

Table: Make sure to rotate between chemical classes each year. Choose your starting point based on what you used for fly control in the previous season. For example, if last year you sprayed pyrethroids for horn fly control, choose an organophosphate or avermectin tag this year. Then, rotate to a different class next year. This should allow you to have a 3-year tag rotation.

There are a lot of things that cattlemen can't control (markets, weather, feed prices, global pandemics...), but horn flies aren't one of them. Whatever method you choose this year, do something. Don't let some little flies bite off more of your profits.



Picture: Kelly Palmer applying fly tags. County Extension Coordinator Anthony Wiggins assisting.