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Preventing Cattle Theft

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The theft and illegal slaughter of cattle has become a serious problem in the cattle industry and the law enforcement sector. The cattle rustling problem is no longer limited to the western states. In fact, the producer in the midwest is particularly vulnerable to these losses.

Who Are the Thieves

Livestock theft, especially cattle theft, in its various forms has become a highly profitable business. Any number of individuals may plan and conduct the rustling operation. These individuals may be acting alone or as a part of a well-organized livestock theft ring. A theft ring usually has numerous criminal contacts in several states or areas and is responsible for many large-scale thefts.

These theft rings may be involved in any or all of the following:

- Renting pastureland in which stolen livestock can graze.
- Feeding and raising stolen stock on land owned by those participating in criminal activities.
- Illegal slaughtering and butchering as part of a black-market operation for processed meats.
- Selling stolen livestock to unscrupulous cattle buyers who then sell the stock to other individuals who are selling on the open market.
- Selling stolen livestock to slaughter houses.
- Selling stolen livestock out-of-state in auctions or sale barns.
- Custom feeding of stolen animals in commercial feedlots.

Local people, usually only one or two individuals, are responsible for most rustling in Missouri. In most cases, rustlers take the animals from the farm and sell them at auctions or terminal markets. Sometimes they will slaughter the animals on the farm and remove all or part of each carcass.

Small-Scale Thefts

Although livestock thefts sometimes involve large numbers of animals, usually thefts are on a small scale. But even if only a few animals are stolen, the producer faces an expensive loss. Small-scale thefts are also more difficult for the law enforcement officers to investigate.

Thefts of only a few animals easily can go unnoticed for several days or weeks. For the same reason, small numbers of

stolen animals added to a herd on a farm or at market may not be noticed. The thieves may have several days or several weeks to move stolen livestock hundreds of miles before the producer discovers and reports the loss. If only one or two animals are missing, the operator may think the animals just failed to come up, died in the pasture, or perhaps strayed to the neighbor's pasture.

Some producers make a daily headcount of their animals. But several factors prevent some farmers from doing this. Today, many farmers work off the farm; during the winter months they see their cattle only on the weekends. Other farmers run their cattle in very large pastures that may be brushy and inaccessible. Unless these farmers feed their cattle hay or grain, the cattle will not come up every day. Large herds spread out across large areas are difficult to count. And then some producers just think it is unnecessary to make head counts.

Livestock Thefts Increasing

Several factors increase the frequency of livestock theft. Increases in retail meat prices generally have meant increases in the frequency of livestock theft. Illegal slaughtering and meat processing operations serve a ready market of buyers. Seldom will a buyer implicate the supplier of such meats.

Another factor that opens the door to livestock thieves is the inability of our rural law enforcement officers to combat the crime successfully. In most rural counties, law enforcement depends upon a sheriff and a few deputies. Often these men face the responsibility of patrolling vast areas. Many of these areas are rough and have numerous backroads. The odds are against the officers and in favor of the thieves. In many counties throughout the state, the local law enforcement officials, because of limited personnel and resources, must establish priorities on the use of their time; combatting livestock theft is of lower priority.

Thefts are also more numerous because of modern and rapidly changing theft techniques, which make rustling easier. Pickups with goose-neck trailers, horse vans and camper tops saturate our state. They are highly mobile and attract little attention. Jumping livestock into the horse trailer or the goose-neck trailer is rather simple. Improved roads make transportation of stolen livestock quick and easy. Livestock can be hundreds of miles away before the missing cattle are noticed.

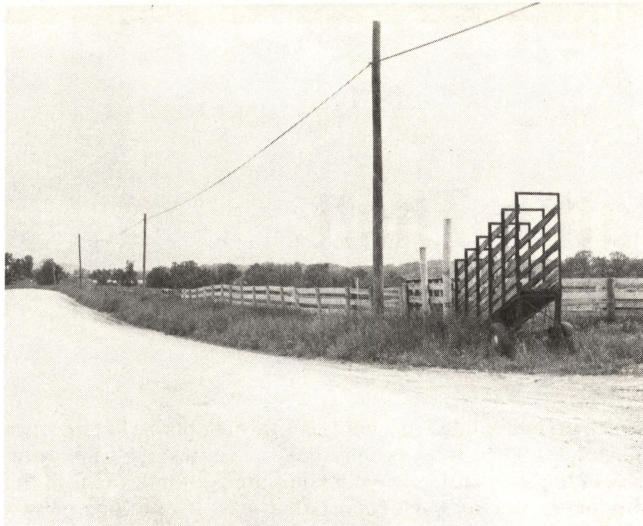


Figure 1. Loading chutes built by roads provide easy access to livestock thieves.

Today's thieves, particularly those of theft rings, are rather sophisticated in their techniques. They prefer to scout areas thoroughly before carrying out the theft. While in the area, they select the number and kinds of animals they want to steal, and they pick the spots that are most accessible for entry, loading and escaping. While scouting the area, they often present themselves as farmers, ranchers or hunters. Some pose as cattle buyers, go to the farm and barter with the livestock owner, being careful to offer a price that the farmer is sure not to accept. The thieves will be careful to avoid suspicions; they may go as far as memorizing names of area farmers and other local information.

Cattle thieves are particularly attracted to cattle grazing in pastures or lots near roads in isolated areas. Animals that are left unattended for long periods of time, such as those grazing on rented land, or those owned by producers that work off of the farm, are particularly vulnerable.

Many times producers make a thief's work easier by building his loading facilities or leaving his portable loading chutes in easily accessible locations. Thieves often use the farmer's own loading chutes at his central corral, or wherever he last used his portable chute. If the thief is using conventional livestock trucks, the loading chute is essential. Some of the more experienced thieves carry their own portable loading chute. With a portable chute, thieves can cut a fence anywhere that is convenient for loading livestock.

Preventive Measures Against Livestock Theft

Never was the adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" truer than in the prevention of livestock theft. You can do many things to protect yourself from livestock theft. If the community gets involved in protective measures, they can be even more effective.

First of all, identify your animals in a way that is legal and conspicuous. Cattle producers have recognized the hot-iron



Figure 2. Thieves will be less likely to steal cattle that show a well-defined scar from a hot-iron brand.

brand as the primary method of owner identification for a long time. In the state of Missouri, the hot-iron brand is the only legal brand and must be registered with the state veterinarian. A good hot-iron brand leaves a well-defined scar from which no hair grows. The last thing a thief wants to do is steal cattle that show legible hot-iron brands.

Many cattle in the state are identified with plastic or metal ear tags and neck chains. Thieves can and usually do remove these easily. Freeze-branding works well for within-herd identification. Several of the breeds of cattle require a distinctive tattoo in the ear, which also would be positive identification. Other forms of identification include an ear notch and the dewlap on the neck or jaw of the animal. It is a good idea to record any marking systems or distinctive characteristics of your animals.

Do not make it convenient for thieves to load your livestock. Plan to build livestock-handling facilities away from the road and near the farmstead. Never leave portable chutes and corrals in outlying pastures or at rented pastureland away from home where they are visible and convenient to use.

Avoid penning livestock overnight or for extended periods of time in lots or areas that are near the road. Thieves that are scouting potential cattle for theft quickly spot such opportunities.

Regularly check outside fences to determine if the wire has been cut. Many times thieves will cut the wire, remove the cattle and then retie the fence.

Good, heavy chains and padlocks may deter the amateur thief but probably will have no effect on the professional. Inverting the top hinges on outside gates at least will slow down thieves since they will have to take off the hinges to remove the gate.

If you don't already belong to an association that offers a liberal reward for the apprehension and conviction of cattle thieves, join one. Post the theft award signs at the most visible points on your outside boundary lines.

If you and your family are going to be gone for extended periods of time, be sure to tell neighbors so they can keep an



Figure 3. Producers can join associations that offer rewards for the apprehension and conviction of cattle thieves.

eye on your property. They can alert the proper authorities if anything suspicious happens on your property. Also inform your neighbors anytime you plan to sell or move livestock, particularly if you plan to do it at an odd hour.

Community Cooperation

Your community can cooperate to protect livestock and property by developing a precinct system. In the precinct system, the farmers of your community can band together under the guidance of the county sheriff to develop certain methods of patrol, observation and reporting. You will need to elect officers who will assume certain responsibilities; then develop a program which they will carry out. Unarmed group members can patrol the area during certain high-risk times.

All members should note any stranger or strange vehicle in the area and note license plate numbers, description of vehicle and direction of travel. Your group should be willing to assist the sheriff in any emergency situation upon request by the sheriff or by any other law enforcement officers. The system has worked well in many areas of the state. The precinct system:

1. is the most efficient system for reducing livestock theft in a given area;
2. allows for active involvement of rural citizens and livestock producers;
3. allows the sheriff to become directly involved with citizens of the area in reducing crime;
4. provides the sheriff access to information from all areas of the county.
5. provides the county citizens with information on livestock theft and how to counter it.

Contact your local sheriff and community leaders about the opportunity of developing a precinct system within your area.

What To Do in Case of Theft

If you are the unfortunate victim of theft of cattle or property, there are some things that you can do to assist your law enforcement officers:

- Quickly notify your law enforcement agency of theft. The quicker you report the theft, the greater the possibility of catching the thief.
- Be very careful not to destroy any of the evidence before the investigating officer arrives. This can include tire impressions, tool marks, blood and other body fluids, and hair from the animals.
- Be prepared to give the officer a detailed list of the animals stolen; a description of the brand, ear tags, tattoos or other marking systems; a detailed description of the age, sex, breed, color or any distinguishable markings such as blazed face, stocking feet, spots, etc. Report to the investigating officer any suspicious things that may have happened in the community in the previous days. If your community is organized in the precinct system, leaders should promptly gather any information from the members of the community and immediately give it to the investigating officer.
- If you belong to a county or state-wide anti-theft organization, report the theft to the organization promptly. And the information should include the number and complete descriptions of the stolen animals.

There is absolutely no way to avoid completely the loss of cattle to livestock thieves, but individuals and communities can do many things to minimize the risk. Remember that your local and state law enforcement officers can be a valuable source of information in a preventive program, and your best hope for the recovery of stolen animals and/or the arrest and conviction of the thieves.

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