

MEDIA DISTORTS CATTLE CYANIDE POISONING IN TEXAS

August 2012 Southern Farmer
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You may have heard or seen news articles about a case of several calves that died of cyanide poisoning in Texas. Some news outlets picked up on this story and added distortions. I want to straighten out the distortions and falsehoods that have been perpetuated in the aftermath of this unfortunate event.

In late May, 15 of 18 head of Corriente roping calves died within a short time of being turned into a Texas pasture. The animals had been hungry, stressed and thirsty after being used in roping practice. The calves were also in poor condition with an estimated body condition score of 4.

The evidence indicates that the animals died of prussic acid poisoning. The pasture was primarily Tifton 85. It is still very unclear just what role if any was played by the Tifton 85 in this unfortunate case. The investigation is still in a preliminary stage and no conclusions should be reached until it has been completed.

Until then, avoid over-reacting to this report or rushing to judge Tifton 85. I believe the extreme circumstances of this event (including the condition of the cattle, the drought the field had been subjected to, the timing of rainfall and fertilization of the pasture and other extenuating circumstances) are more likely to have combined to create a perfect storm.

The risk of prussic acid poisoning from Tifton 85 is extremely small, if at all. Tifton 85 has been used extensively in the Southeastern U.S. and Central and South America since its release in 1995. Tifton 85 is a proven hybrid. It has been more thoroughly evaluated than essentially any other single forage cultivar. It is a safe, high yielding digestible hybrid bermudagrass.

Media accounts have falsely claimed that Tifton 85 is a transgenic or, so-called, genetically modified organism. It is a hybrid and NOT a transgenic or GMO crop. Tifton 85 is a cross between a bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*) and a closely related *Cynodon* species called stargrass (*Cynodon nlemfuensis*). CBS News has since corrected their article online after receiving feedback from the Georgia Seed Development Commission about these inaccuracies.

Other common forage crops (e.g., forage sorghum, sudangrass, white clover, etc.) and pasture weeds (e.g., Johnsongrass, black cherry trees, etc.) can produce prussic acid when stressed, too. Even some fruits and vegetables (e.g., peaches, apples, apricots, cherries, lima beans, etc.) produce cyanogenic compounds in some of their plant tissues, but these parts (usually seeds) are not eaten by people. Cyanogenic compounds will escape as a gas in a short time if allowed access to the atmosphere.

Tifton 85 is superior to all other bermudagrass cultivars within its zone of climatic adaptation. It continues to be the most highly recommended hybrid bermudagrass cultivar in the Southern two-thirds of Georgia and similar climatic zones.

The Texas investigation is still in a preliminary stage. However, I believe the extreme circumstances of this event are more likely to have combined to create a perfect storm. The risk of prussic acid poisoning from Tifton 85 is extremely small, if at all. It is incredibly unfortunate that some have taken this case and used it to sully the reputation of the best hybrid bermudagrass that we have for the Deep South and Central and South America.