AGRICULTURE: WE’RE HALF WAY THERE
Dr. John Wise, Augusta County, Virginia

STAUNTON, VA - Dr. John Wise is a large animal veterinarian and one of the founding partners of Westwood Animal Hospital in Staunton, Va. He’s also a beef cattle producer in Augusta County, Va, in the headwaters of the South Fork of the Shenandoah River.

“Abundant clean water is essential for the health of cattle,” he stresses. “Lepto, E. coli, and mastitis are the main health problems with cattle drinking dirty water.”

Lepto is short for Leptospirosis. This infectious and contagious disease causes abortions, mortality in young calves, and decreased milk production. Producers commonly vaccinate against several strains of Lepto twice a year. It’s a bacterial disease transmitted from the urine of infected animals into open wounds, mucus membranes, and the eyes and mouths of susceptible animals, including humans. The causal organisms survive in surface waters, streams, and moist soil. Infected animals can include cattle, deer, pigs, raccoons, opossums, and rats.

The best treatment for cattle to prevent Lepto is immunization followed by “eliminating access of cattle to surface water or streams used by other livestock,” according to leading university and animal science experts. E. coli infections and mastitis can also be reduced by keeping livestock out of infected wet areas and streams.

Knowing this, Dr. Wise keeps his own cattle out of farm ponds and streams.

“We fenced the ponds off years ago and recently fenced the springs and a really steep area,” he said. “Streams and the river on our home place were especially dangerous during calving, so we fence them off, too. I recall pulling a calf out of Middle River almost every year, many of them dead.”

Dr. Wise participated in Virginia’s Agricultural Cost Share Program more than 10 years ago to help pay for excluding the livestock from farm ponds. Today he has a Natural Resources Conservation Service EQIP contract that excludes additional streams, provides watering stations for rotational grazing, and funds to over-seed pastures with clover.

“These programs have helped us a great deal, and I think producers should visit their local [Soil and Water Conservation District and USDA] offices to find out what is available for them. They have helped us improve the animal husbandry on our farms, and I hope it’s helped the environment, too.”