Using Nature to Dispose Safely of Large Animal Carcasses

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BACKGROUND
With the recent incidences of “mad cow disease,” or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), and other transmissible diseases in North American and European cattle herds, the availability of markets for rendered by-products of beef and dairy cattle has decreased significantly, raising carcass-disposal costs for the rancher, the dairyman and the cattle feeder. Carcass pick-up services historically provided for free by rendering companies are either prohibitively expensive (up to $75/head) or are simply no longer available, especially in remote areas. Moreover, except under recognized emergencies (such as the recent hurricanes along the Gulf Coast), neither burial nor trench incineration is an environmentally preferred option. Cattlemen, large-animal veterinarians, hog producers and horsemen all need a simple, less expensive, on-site means of disposing of premature mortalities.

Composting large carcasses like steers, cows and horses is more complicated than composting dead chickens and piglets, but it can be done effectively on the ranch, feedyard or dairy farm, if the key ingredients – a remote site, carbon, water and diligence – are present and accessible.

OBJECTIVES
Our main objective is to show livestock producers the proper way to compost large animals without compromising air or water quality and without inviting scavengers and pests.

RESULTS / BENEFITS
• The primary benefit of composting is to reduce the biological and chemical threats posed to ground and surface water by decomposing carcasses.
• Carcasses stabilized by composting have a vastly increased “shelf life,” permitting longer-term storage that makes it possible to use the end product in the most profitable, environmentally benign way.
• Result demonstrations across Texas have shown that livestock producers can compost dead animals successfully with a wide range of carbon-rich feedstocks that are readily available in their areas.
• Done properly, composting dead animals on site may provide additional biosecurity by reducing the number of dead animals transported along public roadways.
• Texas’ cattle feeders and dairymen are steadily adopting on-site composting as a cost-effective technique for managing their premature mortalities.

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