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### **Proper Disposal of Dead Animals Vital in Rita's Aftermath**

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AMARILLO – East Texas cattle and chicken producers whose herds or flocks suffered major losses in Hurricane Rita may have their work cut out for them, said two Texas Cooperative Extension engineers.

“It’s just no longer acceptable to pitch dead animals in the bar ditch or drag them out to the Back 40,” said Dr. Brent Auvermann, a waste management engineer here. “Improperly handled dead animals in large numbers are a potent threat to water and air quality, and possibly human health as well. They have to be disposed of with deliberate care and attention to the environment.”

In the past, Auvermann said, livestock and poultry producers only had to make arrangements with a rendering plant to come by and pick up the dead animals – usually a free service.

But steep declines in the market for rendered by-products – on the heels of the outbreaks of transmissible diseases in the cattle industry – have forced rendering operations to cut back on pick-up services or charge for them, Auvermann said.

It can cost a rancher \$40 or more to have a dead cow removed, he said.

Rising fuel prices have a two-fold impact on producers’ disposal options, said Dr. Saqib Mukhtar, Extension waste-management engineer in College Station.

“Most obvious is the increased cost of diesel fuel to send trucks out into the countryside,” Mukhtar said. “But for poultry producers who rely on incinerators to get rid of their dead birds, increased natural-gas prices add insult to injury.

“Burial is not an option for them, except in case of a massive die-off, defined as 0.3 percent or more of daily flock size,” he said.

Mukhtar and Auvermann agree on-farm composting is a reasonable, and potentially cost-effective, alternative to incineration, burial and rendering.

“Dead chickens can disappear in a well-managed compost pile in a matter of days,” Mukhtar said. “It takes more time for the heavier carcasses, like calves and yearlings, which may take up to three months, and twice that for a full-grown steer or cow.”

“Still,” Auvermann said, “the natural heating that goes on in a good compost pile will kill off most of the pathogens, and the end product can be applied to land as an organic fertilizer.”

The catch, he warned, is a compost pile can’t just be thrown together and expected to work.

“Get some help,” he said. “You need the right mix of materials, a secure site away from surface water and uncapped wells, and a front-end loader, at a minimum.”

In East Texas and east Central Texas, materials for building a compost pile include waste hay, peanut hulls, gin trash, sawdust, wood shavings and even shredded yard trimmings.

“Mixing some barnyard manure or partially composted poultry litter into the pile will jump-start the process nicely,” Auvermann said. “If for some reason the mixture is dry, add water as you mix, but whatever you do, don’t soak the pile. The middle of the pile has to get some air.”

Mukhtar noted that the compost materials don’t have to be perfect, but the pile does have to be built properly on the correct site and tended closely, especially for the first two weeks.

“If things look good for the first couple of days, the temperature in the center of the pile rises quickly above 130 degrees F and there’s not a lot of rancid odor coming from it, just keep on doing what you’re doing,” he said.

For more information or guidance on building a carcass composting pile, Auvermann can be contacted at (806) 677-5600 or [b-auvermann@tamu.edu](mailto:b-auvermann@tamu.edu); Mukhtar can be contacted at (979) 845-3931 or [mukhtar@tamu.edu](mailto:mukhtar@tamu.edu)

For complete Texas Commission on Environmental Quality rules and publications on disposal of carcasses, go to [www.tceq.state.tx.us](http://www.tceq.state.tx.us) or call (512) 239-0028. Additional Texas Animal Health Commission rules can be found at [www.tahc.state.tx.us](http://www.tahc.state.tx.us).

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