



Animal Health Conversation Starters with Organic and Alternative (O/A) Farmers and Ranchers

These questions correspond to sections of the Prevention Chapter in the Livestock Project's continuing education series on organic and alternative animal health. Veterinarians can use these questions to initiate conversations with O/A producers. These questions can also be used by O/A farmers and ranchers to think about their current practices. This list can also be combined with Step 1. Movement Risks and Step 2. Disease prevention checklist for a more comprehensive review of animal health and disease prevention steps.

Questions for veterinarians, farmers, and ranchers to consider:

GENETICS

- What breeds do you currently have or want to have in the future?
- Is your herd closed (e.g., animals bred from within the herd) or open (e.g., replacement animals are from outside the herd)? If open, how are replacements chosen?
- How do you choose who to breed?
- Do you know what breeds are best suited to grazing (cattle), browsing (small ruminants), rooting (swine), and scratching and pecking (poultry) in your area?
- Have you considered the pros and cons of a change in your breeding plan?
- Do you practice selective culling for health traits?

NUTRITION

- Describe your knowledge of nutrition for the livestock you keep, or treat.
- Are you aware of the predominant soil types, micronutrient needs, and forages in your area?
- Are you interested in improving the soil and available micronutrients on your farm/ranch?
- Is fresh, clean water always available for your livestock?
- Are you aware of any toxic plants in your area?

STRESS – SOURCES, REDUCTION, AND MANAGEMENT

ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS

- What temperature extremes are a potential problem in your area?
- What tools or practices do you use to help prevent temperature extreme impacts on your animals?

EARLY HANDLING STRESS

- What practices or guidelines do you have for handling livestock and young stock?
- What training do you provide for animal handling for individuals working with your livestock?
- If you keep dairy animals – have you considered the time/duration of dam with offspring?

MOVEMENT AND TRANSPORT

- What types of early-age conditioning do you do with your livestock with different people, vehicles, and noise?
- Are first experiences with transport and other potentially stressful activities handled thoughtfully and calmly?
- Are potential transporters informed on calm, safe transportation practices?
- Have you tried feed rewards with livestock around potentially stressful movement or transport events? (e.g., using a small molasses container to get animals to move onto a trailer – if they've had it before. Or using any treat they like and putting it inside the trailer just out of reach, so they have to sniff their way onto the trailer)?
- Are all handlers aware of and using flight zone principles to move livestock? Are they aware of when to apply pressure and when to back off?

PREDATION STRESS

If predation is a problem on your farm/ranch, what are you using to prevent or mitigate problems?

OVERCROWDING STRESS

- What is your stocking density (animals per square foot in confined spaces)?
- Do you experience overcrowding?
- What strategies do you use to prevent overcrowding?

EXERCISE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

- Are your livestock/poultry allowed outdoor access and daily exercise?
- Do you provide any form of environmental enrichment for your livestock (e.g., straw bales and perches for chickens, scratching posts for cattle, or wallows for pigs)?

VACCINATION

- What is your plan with regard to vaccines for the species you raise?
- Do you use any alternative form of immunization?
- What are your concerns about using vaccines in your livestock?
- Do you have any questions about the use of specific vaccines in your herd?
- Have you had any diagnosed diseases that could be prevented by vaccine use?

PARASITES

- Are you using organically allowed strategies to control or prevent flies, mosquitoes, and external parasites? (Examples include: pasture rotation, multispecies grazing, dragging pastures to disperse manure piles, manure management, sanitation, ventilation, and moisture control, screening, fly parasites, and other beneficial insects, bat conservation, purple martins, and other insectivorous birds, walk-through fly traps, sticky traps, flying insect traps, electric bug zappers, biological pesticides, diatomaceous earthy, botanical pesticides)? Do you have any concerns or questions?
- Do you monitor for internal parasites by collecting and analyzing fecal samples regularly? If you do monitoring, how well is it going?