Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

Take Steps to Protect against Tuberculosis

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Bovine tuberculosis (TB) is a contagious bacterial disease that infects both animals and humans. Although common in the early 1900's, the prevalence has declined dramatically as a result of the Cooperative State-Federal Tuberculosis Eradication Program, which began in 1917.

Until an animal is in the later stages of the disease, clinical symptoms are not usually visible. Late in the disease, the animal may not eat, be thin, have a fever, or have a chronic, moist cough. Most cases of bovine TB are identified today at slaughter. Suspect lesions are sent to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory for confirmation.

In general the eradication program has been successful. The number of herds and animals infected has declined markedly. Furthermore, the disease's presence in humans has decreased as a result of not only the eradication program, but also the advances in sanitation and hygiene, discovery of effective drugs, and pasteurization of milk.

Although the nation seems on the brink of eradicating TB, the ultimate goal of the program remains elusive. In the past, the eradication program has indemnified producers when a herd of cattle was depopulated as a result of TB being identified. During public hearings in 2008 the fiscal realities of flat or declining Federal budgets were discussed, particularly in light of increased herd size in the dairy industry. "Whole herd depopulation is becoming a less acceptable approach," stated Dr. John Clifford, Deputy Administrator, APHIS.

During the hearing Clifford indicated, seven animals were identified as having TB in three CA herds out of 20,000 animals. Three hundred herds in eighteen states and Canada received cattle from those three herds and 16 million dollars was spent in depopulating two of the herds. Twelve thousand head remained in one herd that was not depopulated, with only one TB infected animal in that herd.

The national eradication program will change. More than likely industry will shoulder more of the responsibility. To minimize the potential cost, increase biosecurity measures to protect your herd. Some extra steps to take include:

1) Buy from TB-accredited herds and strictly adhere to state testing guidelines when moving cattle.
2) When sending cattle to a custom feeder, ask about the origin of the other animals at the facilities. Animals which are untested or that originated from areas with known TB cases are higher risk. Consider whether choosing another feeder poses less risk.
3) Permanently identify your cattle and verify that you receive the same cattle back at the end of the growing period.
4) Isolate new animals for 60 days and retest animals moving onto your facility.
5) Observe animals in adjoining pens or fields. If they originate in Mexico, come from areas with known TB, or have been used in events (rodeos, ropings, etc.) consider them a higher risk for TB. Take steps to prevent contact.
6) Minimize contact with wildlife, which can also carry TB.

The prevalence of TB has decreased dramatically. To reach the goal of eradication, every producer must step up their protection efforts.