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Questions and Answers: Keeping Herds Free from Bovine Tuberculosis and Protecting the Food Supply

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"Questions and Answers: Keeping Herds Free from Bovine Tuberculosis and Protecting the Food Supply" (2008). *Michigan Bovine Tuberculosis Bibliography and Database.* Paper 36.
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APHIS Factsheet
Veterinary Services September 2008

Questions and Answers: Keeping Herds Free from Bovine Tuberculosis and Protecting the Food Supply

Biosecurity Measures

Q. What can I do to keep my herd bovine tuberculosis (TB)-free?
A. Following these basic rules will help to keep TB out of your herd:

- Have your livestock tested for TB and if possible, keep a closed herd and raise your own replacement stock.
- Buy your animals from an accredited TB-free herd, test the new animals prior to purchase, and finally, isolate them for 60 days and retest before introducing them into your herd.
- Restrict or eliminate all contact between your herd and other herds.
- Restrict on-farm visitors from contact with your herd. This includes milk haulers, feed delivery personnel, and anyone who may have contact with other herds.
- Make sure your fences are in good condition to separate your herd from wildlife. If the wildlife in your area is affected by TB, contact APHIS' Wildlife Services program in your State for advice to lessen wildlife contact with your herd.

Q. How can I make sure that the animals I buy come from a TB-free herd?
A. Herds recognized as accredited TB-free are accompanied by a certificate. Always ask for a copy of the certificate when you are purchasing animals.

Q. How can I make sure that the animals I buy have not been exposed to a TB-infected herd?
A. The best way to make sure that purchased animals have not been exposed to TB is to buy animals from an accredited TB-free herd. Additionally, have animals tested prior to purchasing and moving them to your premises. Isolate the new animals for 60 days and have them retested before commingling them with your herd.

Q. Are new animals introduced to my stockyard a threat?
A. Commingling new animals with a herd can introduce diseases, especially if they are not properly screened for disease prior to introduction. Make sure that the new animals added to your herd are screened for TB.

Q. How do I protect calves from disease exposure?
A. Unweaned calves are the most susceptible to illness. Separating calves from older animals is an effective management practice to reduce exposure to disease. The use of milk replacer or pasteurized milk is critical in reducing infectious diseases—such as TB, Johne's disease, salmonella, and E. coli—that can be spread through milk.

Q. If there is a TB outbreak in my area, are there any additional biosecurity measures, above and beyond best practices that I should take to reduce the chance of my cows getting the disease?
A. Practice good biosecurity at all times. Do not introduce new animals to your herd without first isolating them for 60 days and having them screened for diseases. Also, do not allow visitors to the livestock areas of your farm, except for regulatory personnel who may have to test your herd for disease. Prevent mingling or fence line contact with other susceptible animals (domestic and wildlife).

Q. What biosecurity measures can I take at sale barns, shows, and exhibitions to lower the risk of disease exposure?
A. After visiting a sale barn, show, or exhibition, do not wear the same clothes—including footwear—around your own herd until you have cleaned and disinfected them.

Thoroughly clean any vehicles, trailers, etc. that have been to the sale barn, show, or exhibition. Disease can be transported by manure stuck on, among other things, the wheels, tires, and fenders. When bringing animals home from a sale barn, show, or exhibition, isolate them from the rest of your herd for 60 days and have them tested before allowing them to commingle with the rest of your herd.

Animal Identification and Traceability

Q. How does animal identification help me maintain a healthy herd?
A. Animal identification is the key to maintaining good records, and good records are the key to good herd health. Thorough recordkeeping can track everything from knowing which animal is which, to which animals need treatments and when. More and more records are required for various marketing certification programs. Proof of treatments and when they were applied is gaining importance in today's "farm to fork" verification markets.

Q. How does animal identification help if there is a TB detection or outbreak in my State?
A. When dealing with TB, knowing the origin and movement history of all your animals can help you know whether or not they may have been exposed to the disease. Animal identification and good records can help veterinarians more quickly trace your animals and determine if they could have been exposed to TB. Traceability is the key to protecting animal health and marketability.

Q. What is traceability?
A. Traceability is the ability to determine all of an animal's movements from birth to slaughter.

Q. What is the traceability status of the United States?
A. Traceability in the United States varies by species. For instance, the cattle sector has the greatest need to rapidly advance traceability to maintain consumer and trading partner confidence.

In December 2007, USDA released the "Business Plan for Advancing Animal Disease Traceability," which details recommended strategies and actions to harmonize existing animal health, marketing and identification systems to improve the animal disease traceability infrastructure in the United States in order to reach optimum traceability. The plan builds upon the stated goals and objectives of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) by offering detailed recommendations and strategies that will continue to move us towards the 48-hour traceability goal. Increasing the traceability in the cattle sector is one of the business plans' top priorities.

Q. What can producers like me do to improve disease tracing in the United States?
A. One of the easiest things you can do is to use animal identification devices, specifically NAIS-compliant 840 devices. The use of these devices provides an increased level of traceability.

- 840 devices are linked to the premises of application, providing easy access to contact information for a previous owner.
- Animal health officials can locate affected and susceptible animals more rapidly.
- Response measures can be established more quickly and disease spread stopped faster.

Q. Why are cattle tested for TB getting tagged with a certain type of radio frequency identification (RFID) tag?
A. APHIS has decided to use NAIS-compliant 840 RFID tags for its program disease work. This includes TB eradication efforts. The tags allow for faster and easier testing of cows.

During TB testing, each animal needs to be handled twice—once to inject and once to "read" the test. The use of RFID tags eliminates the need to manually record identification numbers and greatly speeds the process. By reducing the time each animal is restrained, the RFID tags help reduce stress and increase the quality of the data obtained.

Additionally, the tags serve as more than just an official identification number for interstate movement. When paired with other commercially available hardware and software, the tags can assist cattlemen with other herd needs, including:

- Animal movement records
- Animal health records
- Breed registries
- Performance recording, and
- Marketing programs

Q. If my cows have to be tested for TB, will they have to be tagged? Does it have to be an RFID tag?
A. One of the requirements associated with an official tuberculin test is that the animal tested must be officially identified and the identification recorded on all associated test charts. RFID tags are not required, but some sort of identification that qualifies as official identification (breed registry tattoos, metal eartags, registered brands, approved NAIS tags) will be required.

Q. What are the benefits of animal identification?
A. Animal identification allows for more rapid traceback in the event of a disease outbreak. This helps halt the spread of disease, minimize producer losses, and get business back to normal as quickly as possible.

Animal identification through NAIS-compliant 840 devices also offers producers the opportunity to use one identification number for multiple purposes, reducing the number of identification systems used and the complexity of recordkeeping. The 840 devices can assist cattlemen with other herd needs, including animal movement and health records, breed registries, performance recording, and marketing programs, including the mandatory Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) program.

Q. Can I use NAIS-compliant 840 tags even if I'm not part of a TB-traceback/investigation?
A. Yes. Any livestock owner can choose to use NAIS-compliant 840 tags. Some of these devices are already being used by large dairies to track the daily production of individual animals.

Q. Where can I get more information about these tags?
A. For more information about how to obtain tags, visit www.usda.gov/nais.

Protecting the Food Supply

Q. Do slaughtered TB animals enter the food chain?
A. No. Animals that are identified as being suspicious for TB do not enter the food chain and are sent for diagnostic necropsy.

Q. If a herd has TB-positive animals in it, can slaughtered animals from the herd enter the food chain if they test negative for the disease?
A. Animals from affected herds that test negative are inspected by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service at slaughter. If an inspector finds any signs or symptoms of disease, the carcass is condemned and does not enter the food chain. If there are no signs or symptoms of disease, the carcass is allowed to enter the food chain.

Q. Can TB transmission occur through eating infected bovine?
A. TB infection of muscle, or meat, is rare. Threats to human health occur through close contact with infected animals (bacteria in aerosols) or drinking unpasteurized milk. Please visit www.fsis.usda.gov for information on how to properly prepare meat products for safe consumption.

Q. What can I do to help protect my family from bovine TB exposure?
A. Here are a couple steps you can take to help prevent TB exposure.

- Do not drink raw or unpasteurized milk.
- Do not drink from a cattle watering source.
- Limit your exposure to sick animals and time spent in enclosed areas with livestock.
- Wash well after handling any livestock, especially if they are sick or acting unusual.

Q. If I am exposed to a TB-positive animal, will I get TB?
A. If you have been exposed to a known TB-positive animal, consult your personal physician or local community health department and follow their recommendations.

Additional Information
For more information on bovine tuberculosis, please visit the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov. Click on "Hot Issues" and then "Bovine Tuberculosis."

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