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BOVINE TB ERADICATION PROJECT – RECOGNIZING HOT BUTTON ISSUES

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Abstract: The Michigan Departments of Agriculture, Community Health, and Natural Resources, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Michigan State University work cooperatively together as the bovine TB eradication project partners. The interagency group combines expertise in epidemiology, veterinary and human medicine, pathology, wildlife biology, animal husbandry, regulatory law and policy and risk communications. The stakeholders, those impacted by the disease, include agriculture and tourism industry representatives, “Mom-and-Pop” businesses, hunters, wildlife enthusiasts, farmers, Local Health Departments and legislators. The regulatory agencies are the above mentioned project partners, excluding MSU and USDA Wildlife Services, both of which offer services to agencies and stakeholders. Eradicating bovine TB would not be difficult if there were no social issues surrounding it. The economy, hunting traditions, animal management, tourism and human health are all impacted by regulatory response to the disease. Often the social issues play a large role in decision making, therefore it is important to understand your clientele and anticipate public reaction to policy changes and requirements.

Key words: bovine tuberculosis, Michigan, white-tailed deer

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HOT BUTTON ISSUES

Recognize that information has the potential to frustrate, infuriate, frighten or repulse individuals, and lay out a plan of action on how the information will be disseminated. Understand that internal information sharing is extremely important and a valuable team building tool. External information sharing will create trust and expertise where none existed before. Plan for information dissemination by understanding that what you share with stakeholder groups will become public. Always ask yourself, “Who else will see this information?” and always consider the human impact first.

Always be prepared for the reaction (for every action there is a reaction) and plan

for the worse case scenario (99 percent of the time it won’t occur).

To prepare your project partners for information sharing, let them review draft news releases - they may have additional information and they may see potential problems. Remember, many eyes are better than one and not everyone sees the big picture – most are involved in their piece of the project and don’t think about how it may impact others on the team.

Be sure to talk to stakeholders before information is released, even if it is 15 minutes beforehand. Give copies of news releases, be prepared to justify the release of information and remember that especially with stakeholders, surprises are unwelcome. There is always more support for a project, if stakeholders are kept apprised, and don’t

find out about issues that impact them when a reporter calls for their response.

Talk to politicians, after all they are the people who fund your program. Give them copies of news releases. Give their staff talking points and include a history of the issue and the impact on those that will get this information. Be sure to point out how rare or unusual the case may be. And admit right from the start if you were surprised, caught off guard or blindsided. People are forgiving of human error, if the person admits the error.

Always consider the people your news will impact. In the case of bovine TB it is farmers, hunters, business owners and wildlife enthusiasts.

Talk to reporters because how they report the news influences the public. Therefore, make face-to-face contacts before you need to send out news – get to know them as people. Put good reporters at the top of the list for first to know news.

Remember that industry publications are considered to be media. Even if you are just “*talking shop*”, know that it can show up in print, it may be picked up by main-stream-media and easily misconstrued.

To control a message tell the truth, get statistics and facts, and be prepared to answer every question. Wait for the questions to come to you. You may not have to answer the tough ones, but if you do, you are prepared. Collaborate and communicate with project partners, the more often you share internally - the more often the message will be consistent.

Prep your stakeholders for bad news by identifying them ahead of time, preparing a precise and consistent message, having designated spokespersons, identifying a person to take calls from general public and by giving a heads up to stakeholders by telephone, email, or face-to-face.

Disseminate information through news releases, a hotline, talking points, a web site, email and over the telephone.

Consider your audiences – there are three distinct types and all need attention: Internal, External and Public.

Our internal audiences include Department Public Information Officers (PIOs), staff – including partner agencies, legislators and Public Health Departments. Our external audiences include livestock producers and hunters, industry representatives and special interest groups. The bovine TB Eradication Project tries to inform Local Health Departments, the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, the Michigan Farm Bureau, the Sunrise Side Association, the Alpena Chamber of Commerce and the Northeast Council of Governments before news is released. Finally information is disseminated through media outlets for the general public.

The public is notified through newspapers, radio, television, and the Emerging Diseases website www.michigan.gov/bovineTB. Additionally spokespersons give power point presentations at public meetings such as the Natural Resources Commission, the Agriculture Commission, the Michigan Department of Agriculture bovine TB Advisory Committee and the Michigan Advisory Council for the Elimination of TB (MIACET).

We can all learn from the professionals. “. . . The rapid release of 'bad' news means that the person releasing it has control of that news and journalists and others turn to that person or group for follow-up information..."...If those responsible release the information first, it can ensure that the information available is accurate, though it might have a distinct angle. Also, in time, they gain respect and trust, and later some leeway because there is a track record of their doing the best they

can, maybe in difficult circumstances...”
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Lessons learned . . . worrying is a
good thing – because the failure to anticipate
what may happen . . . means always
operating in crisis mode.