

The Changing Nature of Animal Health Emergencies

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Recent floods in North Dakota and tornados in Texas are reminders that disasters and sudden emergencies can affect any of us at any time. Recent animal health emergencies, such as the outbreak of BSE in England, hog cholera in the Netherlands and foot and mouth disease in Taiwan, also serve notice of the devastating economic impact that large-scale disease outbreaks can have on producers. The negative impact of such emergencies is made even more severe by increased media exposure (resulting in a sudden drop in domestic consumption) and by the reaction of foreign governments (resulting in the shutting down of export markets).

For each major disaster, however, there are innumerable local emergencies which do not make the national or even State news. Every hospital has its own "emergency room" for sudden human health crises. Every county and municipality develops and tests contingency plans for natural and man made disasters, ranging from natural events to toxic spills on roads and highways. Even large-scale disasters are responded to on a local community basis. As in the North Dakota floods, each community along the Red River had to mobilize its own people and resources to help fight the rising waters.

What does this say about your role and the role of local producer groups in being prepared for animal health and other emergencies?

Over the past year, a Working Group composed of representatives of the National Cattleman's Association, the National Milk Producers Federation and other producer groups have been meeting with Federal and State agencies to try to refocus national animal health emergency efforts. Early on, they came to three conclusions:

The first was that the existing model of response, that is, the Federal government would "step in" to take care of foreign animal disease incursions, was too limited. Recent emergencies can be caused by endemic or emerging diseases or, even, by perceived diseases which had become "real" to consumers or to importing countries.

The second was that more emphasis needed to be placed on all four aspects of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The quality of a real response is directly related to the quality of previous prevention and preparedness activities.

The third conclusion was that emergency management is a shared responsibility of State and Federal governments, producer associations, and producers themselves. It is, after all, producers who have to deal with the economic loss caused by emergencies. Further, the producers' knowledge of local conditions, local herds, and local resources which forms the basis of an effective emergency response.

So what can be done?

You can take several actions to improve the chances of successfully managing an emergency some of which you are already doing. In terms of prevention, do what you are already doing: keep your animals healthy, report any unusual disease occurrence, and maintain safe physical conditions for herd management. In terms of preparedness, make contact with your local county Emergency Management Board. In the planning and networking done by your board, make certain that cattle and dairy herd issues are made part of operational response plans. At the same time, make the board aware of the potential implications that a widespread animal health emergency could have for the local area and economy. Finally, you can work with your State associations and with Jerry Bolander, the Colorado State Veterinarian, in several initiatives aimed at improving Colorado's animal health emergency management and its interface with Federal agencies. More on those initiatives in a future newsletter.