Open Borders Put Producers ON HIGH ALERT

Worries that foreign and re-emerging diseases will find a way into U.S. herds have officials in border states on high alert.  BY BOYD KIDWELL

Dave Hartman had a major problem a few years ago. His cows were dropping dead for no apparent reason.

The Winslow, Ariz., rancher quickly notified state authorities. Officials from several agencies arrived to take samples. It was later determined the livestock deaths were likely caused by eating poisonous plants and not by a disease.

“We lost 140 adult cows in our area,” recalls Hartman. “The people that arrived on the scene were good folks but there was too much confusion. As a rancher, watching the confusion didn’t give me a sense of security, especially since we’re in a border state and vulnerable to foreign animal diseases and terrorist acts.”

After the incident, the animal health officials initiated the Arizona Livestock Incident Response Team (ALIRT.) With a modest investment of $200,000 from the state legislature, livestock owners now expect streamlined and strong responses to animal health emergencies. Funds were used in part to provide emergency kits (containing sampling supplies) and to train a network of veterinarians in uniform collection procedures.

Fears that a sudden loss of cattle can signal a large-scale crisis are especially prevalent along U.S. borders. And right now no place seems more of a powder-keg than Mexico.

Life-long rancher, Judy Keeler of Hidalgo
County, N.M., is painfully aware of animal health challenges caused by the out-of-control situation on the U.S. border with Mexico. “Outside of our border area, most people don’t realize how widespread human smuggling is,” says the third-generation rancher. “My major concerns aren’t so much from herd-to-herd contact as it is from diseases carried by humans. Add to that the spread of livestock diseases which are a danger to animal health and to the profitability of our country’s beef industry, and it’s a huge issue.”

As law and order break down, traditional ranching families in northern Mexico are being forced off their land or in some instances murdered. Their ranches are used as staging areas for smuggling illegal immigrants and drugs into the U.S.

Cindy Coping of Tucson, Ariz., says, “My personal concern is that legitimate cattle ranches on the northern Mexican border are being replaced by staging operations for illegal U.S. entry. People being staged at those places come from all over the world, potentially including places where devastating livestock diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease may be prevalent.”

Although many producers aren’t aware of the risks, cattle operations across the country could be affected by foreign and re-emerging livestock diseases. Here’s a look at the most serious disease threats for U.S. cattle producers:

1 **FMD RISKS GROWING.** Foot-and-mouth disease is a serious infection that could be carried into the U.S. by humans through infected smoked, frozen or raw beef, pork and meat from other ruminants (sheep and goats). Mexico and Central America are considered free of FMD but the disease is present in Argentina and Brazil. South Korea is currently battling a major outbreak. Smuggled meat from Asia was blamed for the 2001 FMD outbreak in Great Britain.

The U.S. has not had a case of FMD since 1929 and through strict inspections has kept the highly infectious disease from entering the country. Concerns about FMD and other infectious diseases crossing the border is one of the reasons producers and state officials initiated the Arizona Livestock Incident Response Team (ALIRT http://cals.arizona.edu/ans/alirt/whatisALIRT.html). After noting the value of ALIRT, New Mexico started a similar program.

“The threat posed by FMD and the shortage of veterinarians in rural areas were huge factors in developing the ALIRT program,” says Arizona Extension veterinarian Peder Cuneo.

Veterinarian Tony Knight of Colorado State University suggests farmers and ranchers use caution when inviting travelers to visit their livestock operations, especially if the visitors have recently been in South America, Asia or Africa.

“The FMD virus can survive for days on clothes and boots and even in the back of a person’s throat. A cough at the wrong time could dislodge the virus and cause the cattle industry a lot of problems,” says Knight.

2 **BOVINE TB INCREASING.** After being virtually eliminated from the U.S. during the last half of the 20th century, bovine tuberculosis (TB) is re-emerging as a serious livestock disease. Some states have lost their TB-free status and as a result are testing thousands of cattle. When a state loses its TB-free status, other states require testing and reporting before accepting cattle from that state. Some only accept cattle from states designated as TB-free.

Over 1.5 million head of cattle are imported into the U.S. from Mexico each year. Only steers and spayed heifers from Mexico are allowed into the U.S. and the animals are tested for TB before being allowed across the border.

However, the TB test isn’t 100% accurate and once cattle are legally in the U.S. the animals can end up anywhere and be difficult to trace. “A lot of these cattle are sold while they are still on the truck. It’s possible for cattle to be in Nogales (Mexico) one day, cross legally into the U.S. and be grazing on a wheat field in Kansas the next day,” says Cuneo.

Along with imported cattle, whitetail deer can also become infected and spread TB to cattle. States far away from the Mexican border, such as Michigan and Minnesota, are battling outbreaks of bovine TB believed to have been transmitted by wildlife.

While TB infection can occur by direct contact between deer and cattle, infection is more likely to occur by indirect transmission through contaminated feed, hay and water. Knight points out TB can be transmitted from people to cows and vice versa. Livestock operations may protect animal health by requiring TB tests for new employees.

3 **CATTLE FEVER SPREADING.** Cattle fever (bovine babesiosis) is a deadly disease of cattle caused by organisms transmitted by cattle fever ticks. At one time, cattle fever was a major problem across the southern U.S. but the Cattle Fever Tick Eradication Program eliminated the vectors (ticks) for the disease by 1943.

Cattle fever ticks still thrive in Mexico, however, and disease-carrying ticks are re-infesting parts of South Texas outside of a long-established quarantine zone. During the early 1970s, it took six years to re-eradicate the cattle fever tick after a widespread infestation. The U.S. livestock industry currently saves an estimated $3 billion annually due to eradication of...
cattle fever.

“Keeping cattle fever ticks eradicated from the United States and thus keeping the national cattle herd free of cattle fever is a current and critical agricultural biosecurity issue of national importance,” says Adalberto Perez de Leon, director of the USDA-ARS Knipling-Bushland Livestock Insects Research Laboratory in Kerrville, Texas.

HEARTWATER AND RVF WORRIES. Two other insect-borne diseases are high on the lists of concerns for U.S. cattlemen. One is Heartwater, the other Rift Valley Fever.

Heartwater occurs in ruminants (cattle) and is carried by bont ticks. The carrier ticks aren't naturally present in the U.S., but are similar to native ticks such as the Lone Star Tick and the Gulf Coast tick.

The reason for concern is that bont ticks have been showing up in the U.S. on tortoises imported as exotic pets. Infected ticks could also arrive in the U.S. on cattle egrets flying from Caribbean Islands where the disease is present.

Rift Valley Fever is a mosquito-borne viral disease found mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. At this point, there’s no reason to believe RVF poses a danger to livestock in the U.S. However, RVF is one of eight highly infectious diseases under study at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center in Plum Island, N.Y. The concern: Cattle, sheep and goats are susceptible to RVF and the disease affects humans. RVF outbreaks have occurred in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. With thousands of soldiers and tons of military gear returning from the Middle East, scientists are concerned that RVF could be carried back to U.S. by infected mosquitoes in aircraft or in shipping containers.

Arizona’s state legislature created the Arizona Livestock Incident Response Team (ALIRT) to quickly respond to animal health emergencies in the state.