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NMPF, USDA work to update U.S. foot-and-mouth plans

By Hilary Parker

LONDON — In the past week, a nasty Asian strain of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) has swept across parts of England, Scotland and Ireland, forcing the culling of nearly 50,000 cows, sheep, goats and pigs in these countries and other parts of Europe for fear that the disease may spread further.

Although FMD is not necessarily fatal to animals, it does cause a dramatic drop in weight and milk production in animals, as well as lameness. The disease is characterized by fever and blister-like sores on the tongue and lips, in the mouth, on the teats and between the hooves. It is typically spread between animals, by the wind, on the wheels of vehicles and on human clothing.

As a rule, the disease also doesn't harm humans — though people can serve as transmitters of the virus. All over Europe and even in Australia this week travelers from the United Kingdom were asked to dispose of any food items they may have brought with them from the area. Travelers also were ordered to take chemical shoe baths in many international airports in hopes of protecting against the spread of the disease.

Even in the United States, where the last case of confirmed FMD happened in 1929, Washington State Veterinarian Dr. Robert Mead warned anyone who has been to the United Kingdom in the past 30 days to stay away from farms, ranches and zoos in case they are harboring the virus.

"Foot-and-mouth disease is one of the most dreaded livestock illnesses," says Mead. "U.S. animals are highly susceptible. If an outbreak occurred, the virus could spread rapidly to all parts of the country through routine livestock movements unless detected early and eradicated immediately. If spread unchecked, losses could reach billions of dollars in the first year. Deer and wildlife could become infected rapidly and remain a reservoir for the virus."

Sharing that sentiment is John Adams, director of animal health and farm services, National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF).

"You can't rule out foot-and-mouth in the United States," Adams says. "But it would have to come from outside the country."

Adams says the livestock importation regulations currently in place go a long way toward ensuring FMD does not reach the United States. However, he says that while USDA has plans in place which address how to contain the disease should it be discovered in the United States, those plans need to be updated.

"An outbreak (under the current USDA contingency plan) would mean no milk movement," Adams says. "If they put a quarantine on a farm, nothing can come off of that farm."

Hoping to save dairy farmers the expense currently being experienced in parts of Europe, NMPF has asked USDA's Agricultural Research Service to get a working group together to identify and examine key areas of research that would lead to the development of a new plan against the spread of FMD — specifically, one which would still allow the movement of milk. This emergency management steering committee is set to meet in the next month, Adams says, and is expected to include representatives from USDA's Animal and Plant Health and Inspection Service.

A primary concern for NMPF, after containing the disease, is how to safely transport the milk which comes from exposed or infected animals.

A milk truck, for instance, couldn't transport milk from an infected farm to a processor without potentially spreading the disease either through the milk itself or through the earth in its tires. However, there are existing milk truck vent filters, such as the Pall NovaSIP™ PFR filter offered by Pall Corp., East Hills, N.Y., which may offer a partial solution to the situation.

The Pall Corp. product, which is being recommended in England by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as one of two ways to satisfy the agency's requirement that milk haulers use this type of sterile vent filter, has been independently verified to have a greater than 10^{12} log reduction of both bacteria and viral organisms. The filters fit on the pump exhaust at the back of the truck and work during transportation, loading and pumping, says Jonathan Pratt, a global marketing manager for Pall Corp.

Also of concern for NMPF is the fact that processing the milk for fluid consumption won't necessarily kill the virus, Adams says. But the milk could be turned into cheese because it would have a low enough pH to kill FMD.

But there's more than just the scientific aspect to consider, he says. Even if the milk could be processed into cheese, would consumers buy cheese from diseased animals, even if they were assured it was safe for consumption?

"It's a very complex issue," he says.

Adams says he hopes to have the steering committee in place by the end of this year, and to have a fully-developed contingency plan as soon as possible after that time. NMPF will be encouraging industry participation in the development of the plan, he adds. **CMN**

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