

# NOW: THE TIME TO ACT

*With the threat of foot-and-mouth disease, biosecurity should be top-of-mind for U.S. cattle producers.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

As of April 7, more than 600 detections of high-pathogenic avian influenza had been identified in wild birds across 31 states and 158 detections found in commercial and backyard flocks across 25 states.

These cases are higher in number than the outbreak that occurred back in 2015, though some believe that increase can be attributed to improvements in detection and reporting protocols.

By the end of March, more than 13 million chickens and turkeys in at least eight states had been or were set to be destroyed because of avian influenza.

Cattlemen might consider this to be an unimaginable reality — a unfortunate situation contained only to another sector of the agriculture industry — but Justin Smith, animal health commissioner for the Kansas Department of Agriculture, says with the threat of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) on the horizon, it could become the new normal for the beef industry.

Smith told producers at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA) Industry Convention and Trade Show in Houston, Texas, that while FMD isn't necessarily a current problem for U.S. cattlemen or even producers in the Northern Hemisphere, the time to prepare to protect their livestock, their operations and the food supply from foreign disease is now.

Smith said FMD is the most contagious virus for cloven-hooved animals. Though it doesn't pose a threat to people, it can be spread to livestock through both direct and indirect transmission. With a latent period of two to four days and lifespan of up to three months, Smith said FMD needs to be on producers' minds.

"We know we're susceptible to it at any minute," he said, "so we do have to be prepared."

The challenge is identifying the proper response to FMD and implementing action without killing the same industry they're trying to save, Smith added.

He has a goal for all beef producers: prevent the spread of FMD while restricting movement to better promote a secure beef supply.

"We know the best way to survive this disease is to never get infected," he explained. "You are not at the mercy of that virus."

With an advanced biosecurity plan built on restrictions of movement and the education of employees, Smith said producers can take the threat of FMD in hand.

## BUILDING A BIOSECURITY PLAN

"Remember that biosecurity is a verb," said Julia Herman, NCBA beef veterinarian specialist. "You as the producer have the most control of biosecurity."

Herman presented alongside Smith at the Industry Convention and Trade Show, reminding producers that biosecurity plans are the balance of finding what's necessary and what's practical for keeping domestic and foreign diseases from entering cattle operations.

Herman said biosecurity begins with the ability to have effective and efficient conversations with staff.

"You can't really have a biosecurity plan without a good communication plan," Herman said.

Smith says the individuals that need to be included on the plan are all employees on an operation, the local veterinarian and the owners of the ranch or farm.

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He encourages the naming of a biosecurity manager, the individual on site who's responsible for implementing the plan if outbreak ever does rear its ugly head. This individual will also oversee employee training. Smith said this means they'll be responsible of sharing the details of the biosecurity plan, implementing important action during a crisis and holding others accountable during an outbreak.

Beyond open communication, Herman said a biosecurity plan typically focuses on a few key elements: exclusion, physical separation, cleaning and disinfection.

Smith compares a cattle operation to a castle. By overlooking the keep as a whole, lines of separation can be drawn. Producers should consider their fences and property boundaries to be like a moat; physical barriers are clearly defined and marked. Access points should be limited, controlled and restricted. Entry to the operation should only be allowed if guests pass through a cleaning and disinfection station.

"We're helping each cattle producer implement and document practices they're already doing and looking at other practices they could be doing to help reduce disease," Herman said.

## LIVING LESSONS

In Moorefield, W.Va., Mitch Moran raises nearly 100,000 broiler chickens and manages about 500 Angus cows at Fairview Farms. In Moran's mind, biosecurity is a more obvious topic of conversation for his three broiler houses than it is for his cattle herd. Though Moran says his broiler operation is on the smaller scale compared to others in the industry, separation and cleanliness are still at the top of the business's priority list.

He tracks the arrival and departure times of feed trucks, requires all outside individuals to mark a sign-up sheet and provides a footbath for visitors as they venture from broiler house to broiler house. Moran says the extra measures are set in place for both biosecurity and traceability purposes.

On the flip side, Moran says his biosecurity plan for the cattle herd is centered around keeping his stock healthy. In the cattle business, Moran says he can sometimes fall prey to thinking biosecurity isn't an everyday concern.

But with FMD being a more realistic threat to the United States every day, Moran says it might be time to change his tune — he says it might just be time for all seedstock breeders to prepare for the worst.

"Our focus should be on where people and animals are coming and going," he says. "Ultimately, purebred



breeders are like schoolteachers. I think they should be held to a higher standard."

Like many of his seedstock peers, the driving force for most of Moran's choices at Fairview Farms is focused on the bull sale they host annually. While in good years this sale is an opportunity to spread quality Angus genetics, Moran says he can easily see how FMD could change this experience. With the spread of disease a constant threat, Moran lets biosecurity and management decisions become synonymous.

"I think you look at it as whether you're a closed or open herd. Management is what you do when you bring new animals into the farm," he explains. "You want your cattle to be healthy. You don't want to be bringing new diseases in."

For success to be achieved, however, Moran knows he cannot close his herd completely. He limits new additions by only bringing in a handful of bulls and a cow or two each year. When those new animals do come to the farm, Moran does all that he can to ensure they're healthy before they join the ranks of his own stock.

Before even purchasing an animal, Moran makes sure

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practices, feeding information, and more.

The operation is inspected every 15 months, but Moran says the practice of recording important information continues year-round. When the farm first looked into the all-natural program, Moran was pleasantly surprised to see that not many changes were needed.

“A lot of our general practices fell in line with what we were needing,” he says.

It’s a truth that mirrors biosecurity in his opinion. Many producers might not find themselves bringing up the hot topic in everyday conversation, but Moran says it’s present in the way they care for their cattle and run their operations.

“It’s our livelihood,” he says.

there’s plenty of vaccination information available. If a breeder isn’t known for having healthy animals or there aren’t proper records on an animal, Moran won’t chance it. Only animals likely to be able to stay in tip-top shape return to the farm in West Virginia.

Once an animal has been purchased, Moran places them in isolation. Each new animal keeps to themselves, in a pen alone. Moran says this helps prevent fighting and helps keep animals calm. There isn’t a set amount of days Moran waits before turning an animal out with the herd — he watches each animal and makes a decision based on individual performance and time of year.


“I want them to get back on feed and water and rested up,” he explains.

Beyond isolation, Moran works to keep good records of herd activity. From calving information to vaccination practices, recordkeeping is a quiet but large part of biosecurity.

For Fairview Farms, diligence in records became emphasized once Moran joined Meyer Natural Angus beef. The Global Animal Partnership (GAP) certification requires Moran to track animal health, management and handling

“You don’t abuse your living. You clean it, care for it. That’s what we do with these animals. You’ve got to love them and care for them.”

In Moran’s eyes, caring for animals is as easy as breathing. To put the label of “biosecurity” on that care and being willing to take a few extra precautionary steps is what separates a good cattleman from a great one.

With FMD looming in other parts of the world, Moran says he sees that now is the time to start having the hard conversations about biosecurity. He aims to improve knowledge and awareness today, so tomorrow he can continue to do what he loves with his family, because he wouldn’t have it any other way. 

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