

Starting Over

Michigan producers make a fresh start after herd tests positive for bovine TB.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

In September 2000, Kevin and Jack Small got the call they had been dreading. Three of their first-calf heifers tested positive for bovine tuberculosis (TB).

"We decided to depopulate," Kevin says. "We had made our decision ahead of time."

When the Curran cattlemen got the news, Michigan producers still had the option of removing the reactor animals then retesting in six months. If there were no reactors the second time, they could go to annual testing, but if they had more reactors it meant the whole herd had to be tested again in six months.

Even with no reactors after the first six months, the process lasted for five years. There was also always the danger of more animals contracting the disease. Although research is ongoing, it appears cattle in northern Michigan are getting the disease from deer.

The Smalls felt the best approach was to make a fresh start, even though it meant losing the herd Jack and Maxine had started in the early 1950s. The Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) paid an indemnity and depopulated all 270 cows, calves and bulls.

"Dad and I aren't such hard-nosed business people that we didn't have feelings," Kevin says. "But it impacted Karen and Mom and the kids worse. Clyde was 16 and Emily was 14, and it really bothered them."

"We wondered where the money was going to come from," says Kevin's wife, Karen. The cow-calf operation was the sole source of income for both families. Also, Karen says, "I walk through the cow pasture every day. It wasn't the same."



► Kevin says it bothered his wife, Karen, worse than it did him when they had to depopulate their cow herd.

Back in business

Along with the decision to depopulate, the family had also decided they wanted to get back in the cow-calf business as soon as possible. Thankfully, they had two factors in their favor.

First, they were paid for their cattle. "The indemnity is for market value, and I haven't heard any producers say they were disappointed with it," Kevin says.

He adds, "MDA worked closely with us and put us back in business as soon as they

could. Those folks are trying to do their job the best they can.” The MDA had some practice depopulating TB-affected cattle herds. Since testing started in 1998, the count reached nine with the Smalls’ neighbors in summer 2000. The Smalls were No. 10. MDA has now depopulated 37 cattle herds.

Second, Kevin says, “Fortunately for us we were financially stable enough it didn’t impact us too much. Dad’s a good businessman, a good financial manager, a good planner. He was on the PCA (Production Credit Association) board 25 years or more.”

It wasn’t like they had a lot of equipment payments to keep up. “We don’t have too many new wheels,” Kevin says. “In my lifetime we’ve only bought one new tractor. That was in ’76, and we still have it. Making hay is about all we do. We don’t grow corn.”

That financial and planning savvy helped put them in a position to make a fast start with a new herd. By February 2001, they shipped in 38 heifers from Montana. They bought 30 cows and bulls at a dispersal sale in March. Sixty-five open heifers from Kentucky followed in May. Then 30 more cows came from another dispersal sale. By summer, they were back up to 160 cows and heifers.

“Even though we didn’t have a full calf crop to sell the first summer, production was adequate. Weaning weights have been in the 575- to 600-pound (lb.) range since we put the cows back together. They were at 600 lb. before, so we’ve been happy with the production,” Kevin says.

While the Smalls would have just as soon not gone through depopulation, they took advantage of the situation to make positive management changes.

Change in management

First was a breed change. They had Angus-Holstein cows and used Charolais and Simmental bulls for a terminal cross. Their new herd is mostly Angus-based, and they want to keep it that way. “With our new herd we needed to use different bulls to come up with feeder cattle,” Kevin says. “The market is looking for black cattle, so we now use Angus bulls from the Michigan State bull test sale.”

The Smalls had a chance to test-drive their new genetics by participating in a feedout trial at Michigan State. They got the opportunity by being members of the North Country Beef Producers (NCBP), a group established to help producers stay in business in the face of the area’s TB problems (see “Working Together, Looking Ahead,” page 252).

“The feedout program was a good learning experience for all who were involved,” Kevin says. “Given the right economics, I can see us feeding more cattle.”

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► Producers in northern Michigan use deer-proof fences to keep deer away from their hay supplies.

Be prepared

The Boy Scout motto is a good one for trying to avoid, and cope with, contagious diseases, especially those spread by wildlife. Whether it is bovine tuberculosis (TB) in Michigan or brucellosis (Bang’s disease) in Wyoming, those diseases can sneak into your cow herd.

Kevin Kirk, Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA), has had more than his share of experience since deer introduced and spread TB to cattle herds in the northern part of the state.

First, Kirk emphasizes, “Keep some simple records. Note who you are buying cattle from and who you are selling to. I’m a firm believer in individual identification (ID) of livestock. Write down and record your cattle’s identification numbers.”

Under the prevention category, he says, “Even though you are raising cattle on pasture, do whatever you can to isolate them from wildlife. Keep round bales away from woodlots. That’s where deer congregate in the winter.”

Watch your water sources, too.

University of Georgia Extension veterinarian Doug Ensley recommends producers provide water troughs whenever possible and keep their cattle away from creeks and ponds.

“Deer and bison are going to congregate at streams and ponds,” Ensley says. While TB is usually airborne, brucellosis can be carried in the water. The same goes for leptospirosis.

He also urges producers to remove any aborted fetuses in their pastures, whether they are from cattle, deer or bison.

In case the preventative measures don’t work, MDA’s Kirk urges producers to have some type of insurance on their herds. “Indemnities make me nervous,” he says. While both the MDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) originally joined forces to pay indemnities to Michigan cattle producers who had to depopulate because of TB, the state ran out of money. Thankfully, USDA stepped up and is paying the whole indemnity, but that may not always be the case.

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In addition, they've added individual identification (ID) to their management list. Electronic identification (EID) tags are now a requirement for Michigan cattle because of the TB problems, and Kevin sees it as a plus.

"We didn't have individual cow records before but now we can," he explains. "We put the EID tags in the new group of cows in 2001. We had EID tags before other producers hardly knew what they were."

While the Smalls wouldn't wish depopulation on any producer, Kevin says

it helps to be prepared. If you live in an area where TB or brucellosis (Bang's disease) is likely, he advises, "Know what the procedures are for depopulation." In Michigan's case, the state department of agriculture works with USDA on testing and depopulation.

"Be straightforward with them," Kevin says. "We knew we wanted to stay in business and told them early on. We really didn't have any headaches at all getting things back to normal."



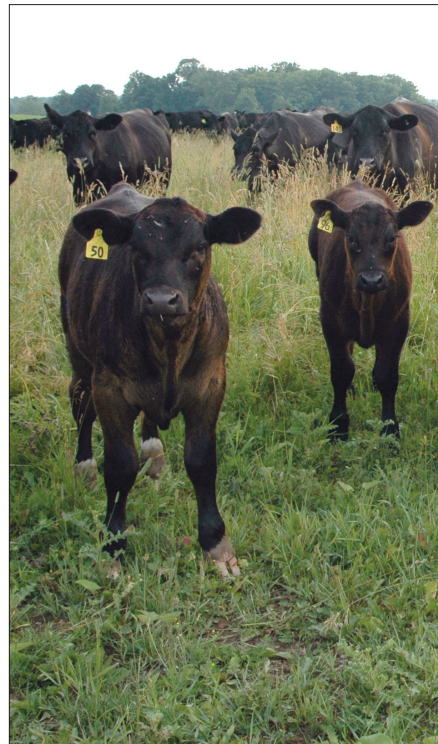
Tried and true

While the Smalls did make several management changes after they had to replace their cow herd, one thing they didn't change is the way they market their weaned and preconditioned feeder calves.

October 2007 marks the 63rd sale of the West Branch Feeder Cattle Association, a group that exists and keeps up a sale facility for the sole purpose of their once-a-year sale. Feeder calves are brought in a day and a half before the auction, weighed off the truck and penned by consignor. Then they are run through the ring during the auction.

"We have loyal consignors," says Kevin Small, who is president of the association. "Some are grandsons of the original consignors."

Their loyalty is worthwhile. Small states, "If it hadn't been making money for them, they wouldn't be doing it."



► Kevin and his family were able to get back in business quickly with purchased cattle.