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TB-Free status delayed after state fails USDA review

By Paul W. Jackson

Cattle ID Tag

Michigan's mandatory electronic cattle identification tag program stands as a high point in a recent TB program review from the USDA. Two consecutive reports critical of how the program is run have shown that the state's chances to gain TB-Free status have been delayed by nearly a year due to various challenges that have not been met. MDA officials say the program is now back on track. Shown applying a tag at last year's Ag Expo is MSU's Dan Buskirk.

Michigan cannot hope for TB-Free status until at least October, 2008 because the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) and its veterinary services department failed two consecutive USDA reviews.

Plagued by a report on its TB eradication program conducted in March that named 79 points in which the state failed to meet requirements outlined in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Michigan and the USDA, the state began scrambling to

set things right and get back on course, but the damage had been done. The goal of having TB-Free status for all of Michigan except the 11-county Modified Accredited Zone (MA) in the Northeast had been set back at least 10 months from the coveted Jan. 1, 2008, target date.

Citing a lack of communication within the MDA, poor record-keeping, failure to meet deadlines, lack of proper equipment for staff despite adequate funds and many other items in the 77-page report, USDA staffers said the "State has failed to adhere to the conditions in the MOU required to maintain their split-state status."

The possibility of losing current status was of immediate and grave concern, said Ernie Birchmeier, livestock specialist with Michigan Farm Bureau.

"Delaying TB-Free status is one thing," he said. "But falling backward would be damaging to Michigan's cattle industry. Not only would we lose markets, but we'd be back to annual whole-herd testing, and we wouldn't have any money to pay for it. The onus would all be back on producers. We cannot allow that to happen, and if it means some harsh words need to be said, then let's say them."

USDA's words were indeed harsh in the report, but it's not as bad as it appears, said Mitch Irwin, director of the MDA.

"It's a significant setback, but we're moving forward," he said. "We know the job needs to get done and we're redoubling our efforts."

Because of that renewed commitment by the MDA to fix problems uncovered by the review, including weekly meetings and timely follow-up reports, Michigan is now in little danger of losing its existing split-state status, said Dr. John Clifford, chief veterinarian with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

"I'd state that I do not feel at this point in time, with the commitment we have from the state and from working together with the state, that we should be concerned" about losing status, he said, more than a month after the USDA report was issued.

The assurance from Clifford that softens the initial review report on TB status is good news, Birchmeier said, but doesn't lessen the importance of moving toward TB-Free status as quickly as possible.

Missed deadlines

Last November, less than two months before the MOU deadline, and with the first of the failed USDA reviews less than a year old, MDA's TB Program Manager Dr. Michael VanderKlok assured Michigan Farm News in an exclusive interview that the MOU would be done on time and that the USDA had encouraged Michigan to apply for TB-Free

status.

"... We will have that application sent in before the first of the year, certainly," he said.

Unfortunately, the MOU completion requirement before free status applications would be considered was more than six months late, and problems found in that first unfavorable review were, in USDA inspector minds, not addressed.

"I reiterated to Director Irwin," Clifford said, "that we would consider free status for Michigan's Modified Accredited Advanced Zone after everything was in place for at least 12 months. I think MDA's suggested date of Jan. 1, 2008, for free status was maybe unrealistic to begin with."

To get the TB team back on track, Irwin has appointed Dr. John Tilden, a veterinarian and epidemiologist, to head the TB project in Michigan and to respond to USDA reviews. State Veterinarian Steve Halstead said Tilden's new position frees MDA's technical experts to focus on details outlined in USDA reports.

"Part of the problem is that when individuals write their parts of the report, they don't see things in their entirety," he said. "It's kind of like the old story of the blind men describing an elephant. They all have their individual opinions, but none can understand the whole elephant. USDA would prefer that we have a system like Mexico's, where to move between states, cattle haulers are stopped at gates by armed guards. Our program has a lot of components in place for tracking animals, and they are effective. But nothing is as secure as a guy at a gate with a gun."

No matter what individuals at MDA think of USDA's methods, however, the bottom line is that it has ultimate control over how things are done in Michigan.

"The handwriting in the report is black and white," Halstead said, "and there is no option of failure. We will fix the things in the report, and it will happen in full partnership with the USDA."

Commendations

Not all of the report was critical of MDA. The USDA remains impressed with the state's mandatory electronic identification program, but noted that it should be utilized everywhere, said Dr. Reed Macarty, USDA's veterinarian in charge for Michigan.

"We got a pat on the back for electronic ID, but were smacked for not using it 100 percent in the Modified Accredited Zone," he said. "Also, USDA wants any herd tested to be reconciled electronically."

That was an area in which the state failed.

"The promise for 100 percent reconciliation in the MA zone was not kept," Macarty said. "But from this point on, if you test today, you'd better dig up the last test and reconcile it, and account for every animal."

Michigan also received kudos for excellent cooperation between agencies, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) received relatively high praise for its efforts to find and eradicate TB from the wild deer herd.

For conditions inside the MDA, though, the report told a different story.

"Putting Dr. Tilden in charge puts ownership of certain responsibilities on the record," Macarty said. "We needed to identify someone who will take responsibility. The problem before, perhaps, was that people were saying 'this or that is not my job.' That brought up concerns about attitude, and we needed to make an attitude adjustment from the neck up in some cases."

In some cases, staff were not equipped to do the job they were charged to do, the report said.

For example, while staff complained to USDA that it didn't have enough wand readers available to take advantage of electronic ID tags, which have been mandatory in the Modified Accredited Zone since 2004, \$155,000 went unspent in fiscal years 2004 and 2005.

"That was federal cooperative agreement money from USDA, and it went into several different programs, including avian influenza, which at the time was considered a serious and immediate public health threat," Halstead said. "One caveat I would include is that that money was received and not spent before I was on the job. When Dr. Arnoldi was here, she started the precaution of not spending money until we had it in our hands, and it could be that the money was still not in place for us to spend, because the federal budget often does not get it to us in time for our fiscal year."

Halstead said there are at least 11 wand readers available to staff now, however, and more will come as needed with more funding. Irwin said funds needed to complete program corrections will be diverted from other MDA budget areas, if necessary, because there are no new funds available.

Overall, the USDA report said, lack of funds was not a deterrent to MDA's timely adherence to its duty.

"With 13 (veterinarians) on the state side and 13 field (veterinarians) available from Veterinary Services, lack of manpower cannot be cited as a legitimate reason for failure to accomplish program objectives," it said.

The reasons for failure, Birchmeier said, are not insignificant, but the past is past.

"The only thing that matters now is that all of the 79 items are corrected so we can move ahead and get TB-Free status as quickly as possible," he said. "We need to quit arguing about the details and just get it done. If the USDA says we need paper certificates to move between zones, we'd better do it. If we need to actually stop cattle trailers at the (Mackinac) Bridge and look inside, we'd better do it. And if new leadership is needed, we'd better do it."

Whatever criticism the MDA and its veterinary services department have taken, Irwin agreed it's time to shake off the report's wounds, fix what's wrong and get on with ending TB's scourge in Michigan.

"Remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint," he said. "The report is just a snapshot in time, and there have been numerous positives and negatives over the years. This report is a whack over the head, but I'm sure there will be many more to come. Our response to it is the only thing we have control over, and we're confident that the producers of this state will not take one snapshot as gospel, but will look at the overall effectiveness of the program - which is facing unique challenges because of our wild deer herd's reservoir of TB infection - and decide that we're on the right track."

Clifford agreed.

"There are some complimentary things in the report, and one of them is electronic ID," he said. "We applaud that. And overall, there is nothing in Michigan's program so bad that it can't be corrected, and we'll move forward. I would never consider another direction."

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