

Are We Doing All We Can To Keep Our Animals Disease Free?

Dr. Sherri Christie

January 6, 2015

It can be very costly to lose one beef animal right now let alone entire federal markets, therefore we must stay diligent in our biosecurity measures. The purpose of biosecurity is to prevent disease spread onto, within, and out of a herd of cattle. Although it can be challenging to stop disease spread completely, it is critical that we work together to minimize it as much as possible.

Implementing the biosecurity measures laid out in the Canadian Beef Cattle On-Farm Biosecurity Standard by the Canadian Government can help us to protect our own herds from disease as well as the National herd.

The measures laid out in the Biosecurity Standard are intended to be practical and feasible. It is understood for example, that comingling is an integral part of the beef industry and the standard tries to lay out best management practices to deal with such situations.

Biosecurity is critical when dealing with incoming cattle. New arrivals should be segregated for two weeks without direct or indirect contact with other animals in your herd. During this time of segregation cattle should be monitored twice daily and treated promptly. If animals are not already vaccinated, this should be done during this period as well. Vaccine responses are always best when animals are least stressed therefore, they are ideally done at the farm of origin at least two weeks prior to movement. If there are diseases of concern in your herd (Johnes, Bovine Viral Diarrhea, etc) testing for these diseases should occur prior to sale, or during the time of segregation on the new farm. Information about what diseases animals are tested, treated, and vaccinated for should be shared between seller and purchaser.

Beef producers know when they will be dealing with higher risk animals such as young calves (especially those born in close quarters), animals traveling long distances, or multiple source cattle; these situations increase pathogen load and/or stress to the animal and therefore risk of disease spread. Have protocols in place to deal with these animals to minimize stress and disease. It is important to maintain a working relationship with your veterinarian to have in place a herd health plan, including methods to recognize disease as well as prevention and treatment protocols for those diseases. Ensure the people treating disease understand what they are treating for, and when they should be calling in additional help. When something is unusual, and especially when it seems highly contagious, it is important to get help immediately. Veterinarians are trained to know what to do in outbreak situations, and recognizing these situations promptly can minimize economic losses not only to the individual farm but to the industry as a whole.

Cleanliness is also important to biosecurity. We need to minimize contamination of feed with manure. This includes the use of different bucket loaders, forks and shovels for feed and manure as well as keeping feeding areas clean to minimize manure meals. Keeping the pens well bedded decreases pathogen exposure and is good for the welfare of the animals. When was the last time you cleaned out your water bowls or troughs?

Try to segregate your herd from other animals especially other cattle and deer. This requires that you ensure your fences are in good repair. Be aware of what types of high risk animals may be in close proximity to your animals and put in place safeguards to protect your herd. Although sometimes challenging, bird and rodent control are also important aspects of a good biosecurity plan.

Another important area of biosecurity involves human traffic. Do you know what biosecurity measures are taken by those who visit your farm? How are they sanitizing clothing, boots, equipment, and vehicles? Are you prepared for a serious disease outbreak? Do you know all individuals who have been on the premises in the last three months? A visitor log should be maintained including veterinarians, nutritionists, salespeople, breeders, employees, repair people, and other guests. This is critical information to help halt the spread of disease between farms and minimize the cost to producers and markets in cases of serious disease. We need to also ensure resources including water, feed, and medications are coming from safe and reliable sources.

It is important that all personnel know and understand your biosecurity protocols; that all treatment and disease incidence is recorded, and that records are complete.

The Canadian Beef Biosecurity Standards are available on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency website: <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/animals/terrestrial-animals/biosecurity/standards-and-principles/beef-cattle-on-farm/eng/1347287842131/1347292248382>. It is an excellent resource for every beef producer to take advantage of when planning a complete biosecurity plan.