

HEALTH AND BIOSECURITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPANDING COW HERDS

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Introduction

Any time animals are co-mingled there is an increased risk of introducing disease into the herd or group of animals. While this risk cannot be totally eliminated, there are steps that can be taken to reduce the amount of risk and minimize the threat. Biosecurity is the term used to describe a program for the prevention and control of infectious disease. The plan should include practices that reduce the likelihood of introducing a new disease from external sources, and reduce the spread of infectious disease if introduced.

Biosecurity plans can be all encompassing and overwhelming. A good place to start is discussing concerns and needs with your local veterinarian. Development of a plan should commence with a risk assessment in which the problems or agents of concern are identified, their likely effect quantified, and the likelihood of their introduction estimated. Based on this exercise, a prioritized list can be made for the disease agents of most interest. Subsequently, a targeted risk management plan can be developed for those agents of highest priority. As an example, cow calf operations considering expansion of the herd should focus on those diseases that cause reproductive losses or reduced reproductive performance.

Certain biosecurity practices are common and should be incorporated into any plan while others are specific and only incorporated in specific situations. The following are general recommendations that should be considered in developing a plan when contemplating expansion of the herd.

Assess Your Herd First

Before you bring animals into your herd from another source, you should work with your veterinarian to assess the status of your own herd. Is your vaccination protocol adequate and current? There may be additional vaccines you should consider adding for broader protection. Remember that most vaccines require boosters and timing is critical to provide the best protection.

Assess diseases that have been diagnosed in your herd. This will help to know which, if any, vaccines should be administered to animals before entering your herd.

Isolate New Arrivals

New animals should be isolated from the existing herd for at least 30 days. During this time, close observation should be made to detect any type of health problem early. This isolation period also provides adequate time to perform diagnostic testing if warranted and to administer health products such as vaccines, dewormers and external parasite control to the animals before joining the herd. The isolation facility should have no fence line contact with the existing herd. These animals should be observed, fed and handled last.

Appropriate Diagnostic Testing

There are very reliable tests for detection of some diseases while other tests lack the sensitivity and/or specificity to detect disease in individual animals. Diagnostic testing can be time consuming, costly and misleading without an appreciation of what is trying to be accomplished. Understanding the nature of the disease and its transmission can dictate what kind of test, how many tests and which animals to test in order to increase the accuracy and confidence of the results.

A good example of this is testing for persistently infected (PI) BVD animals. Current tests for PI animals are reliable but if appropriate testing is not performed, the risk is still present. Suppose you buy a group of pregnant females and test them for PI BVD. The test results are all negative. You can be pretty confident none of the females are persistently infected. However, you still do not know the status of the fetus the pregnant female is carrying. In this case, these animals would need to be kept separate from the rest of the herd until they have calved and the calves tested.

Source of Purchased Animals

The source of purchased animals dictates to a large degree the amount of risk you are taking. Purchased animals from multiple sources with an unknown history is a high risk proposition whereas purchasing animals from a known single source can mitigate a lot of the risk. Prior to a purchase, consider having your veterinarian contact the seller and his veterinarian to ask about herd health. Every seller of healthy animals should give their veterinarian permission to discuss the herd's health status with potential buyers and their veterinarians. In fact, the seller should welcome this communication.

Conclusion

When considering expansion of the cow herd a biosecurity plan is critically important for protecting your investment. While some general guidelines are presented above; clearly, the biosecurity plan must be individualized for each operation. Taking the time to work with your veterinarian on a plan ahead of time is an important first step.

Literature Cited

- Dargatz D. A., Garry F. B., Traub-Dargatz J. L., "An Introduction To Biosecurity Of Cattle Operations", The Veterinary Clinics Food Animal Practice (18), 2002.
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