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Birds putting us on edge – Avian Influenza in Cows?

In the last month or so, many may have heard/read about H5N1 (highly pathogenic avian influenza – HPAI), popping up on American dairy farms. Within the last 4 months, cows across various states (including Texas, Ohio, and Michigan) have been testing positive with a strand of HPAI, that has never been found in cattle before. Although, no cows in Canada have been found to be positive, and none of the surveillance in the Canadian dairy food supply has noted its presence; I think being aware of this virus, and what to keep an eye out for would be valuable. Especially, as we often move cattle back and forth across the border very freely.

How did we get here?

In March of 2024, a “mysterious” disease first presented itself in Texas, and shortly after, other states followed. Some dairy cattle on farms began to go off feed, have reduced production, and individual cow’s milk looked colostrum-like (even though when not near freshening). Puzzling many veterinarians and laboratories, this disease was found to be a strain of H5N1 that crossed from birds to cattle. Over the last few years, H5N1 has been found in poultry flocks across North America; but was never noted to be in cattle until now. In the last few months, this virus has been seen in many states (9 states, with a total of 52 herds affected to date).

How is it spread?

Unfortunately, because of how new this is to the cattle industry, many of the key questions remain without answers, one of which being how it is spread. One of the main theories is through milk (and milking equipment), as this is where the virus can be detected in high levels (compared to other body fluids / manure). Spread is also thought to occur through nasal fluids; however, this is considered to be only during the early stages of an infection in a cow, compared to milk which can be a source for longer.

As a result of milk being suspected, it is highly encouraged to try to not feed raw milk to youngstock, and instead use milk replacer, or pasteurized milk.

What to look for?

- Dead waterfowl
 - This virus is often found in waterfowl (including ducks, geese, and other birds), as a result, it tends to cause a high rate of death in these animals.
- Dead cats
 - Unfortunately, cats appear to be more sensitive to the HPAI cattle strains, and have been experiencing mortality rates, with evidence showing it being up to 98%.
- Cow clinical signs
 - Off feed – for unknown reasons (for example, ruling out twisted stomach)
 - Reduced milk production (individual and at a herd level)

- Colostrum / yellow-coloured, thick milk
- Abnormal manure
- Dehydration
- +/- fever

Who is at risk?

Currently, HPAI has only been detected in lactating cows; there is no evidence of a beef animal, heifer or dry cow testing positive. Possibly, because of how the virus spreads. However, as mentioned above, cats are also prone to death because of this virus. To date, only a handful of cases have been verified in humans, specifically in farm hands. Although the risk of infection to humans is still considered low, taking steps to minimize the risk of infection is important.

As discussed previously, throughout a period of surveillance, there has been no positive test result found on Canadian dairy products. In the USA however, there have been remnants of the virus noted in their dairy products. That being said, the test performed is a test that finds parts of the virus even after it has been killed / destroyed. The pasteurization of dairy products is the reason there is no risk to humans through consumption of dairy products (even if the milk comes from a farm that has been confirmed to have HPAI).

Steps you can take:

- Wear disposable gloves when working with cattle, especially milk.
- Consume only pasteurized milk.
- Reduce cattle movement, especially buying new cattle into the herd.

What does this mean for shipping cattle?

Due to presence of HPAI in cattle in the USA, Canada is requiring negative tests results to import lactating dairy animals. Currently, the US federal government does not require a negative test to import cattle from Canada, especially when going for slaughter. It is still encouraged to discuss with state of destination to ensure they do not have other testing requirements.

What to do if I suspect this is in my herd?

If you find dead waterfowl or cats on your farm that have died for unknown reasons, contact your herd veterinarian for advice. If you note cattle with the clinical signs mentioned above, contact your veterinarian. They will be able to perform a physical exam and consider if they think your animal / herd matches the clinical picture. At which point, they will be able to help guide the route of testing, including collecting milk samples and nasal swabs.

I hope that this newsletter provides you with a base of knowledge on this emerging disease. With information changing quickly, talking to your veterinarian will help you stay up to date with recent updates.

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Upcoming Stat Holidays

The clinic will be closed Canada Day Weekend, Sat June 29th to Monday July 1st, re-opening Tues July 2nd. As always, veterinarians will be available 24-7 for emergency service. The Saturday fee schedule will remain unchanged from non-stat weekends.

Fly Control

Have you heard the buzz? Large animal technicians are now offering fly prevention in combination with dehorning services. Ask your large animal tech for more information!

