

USDA downgrades NM's bovine TB-free status
(Las Cruces Sun News, NM)
By SUE MAJOR HOLMES

New Mexico has lost its status as a bovine tuberculosis-free state, a decision state officials say is excessive and could cost ranching and dairy operations unnecessary tests.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in a notice published in Thursday's Federal Register, said that because two infected herds had been found in New Mexico's accredited free-zone since May 2007, it no longer met federal requirements and the state had to be downgraded.

"This action is necessary to reduce the likelihood of the spread of bovine tuberculosis within the United States," the notice said.

Officials had expected the decision, which requires that certain cattle be tested before being moved from New Mexico.

Bovine TB was discovered in 2003 in cattle in Curry and Roosevelt counties, but at that time, federal authorities required that only cattle from parts of those counties be tested before being shipped out of state. Then this spring, a cow in a Curry County feedlot was found to be infected with bovine TB, and the USDA began considering requiring more widespread testing.

Gov. Bill Richardson on Thursday called on the USDA to reconsider the state's new "modified accredited advanced" status as soon as possible.

The New Mexico Livestock Board asked the USDA just days ago to authorize a modified accredited advanced zone in Curry and Roosevelt counties, releasing the rest of the state back to bovine TB-free status, board executive director Myles Culbertson said Thursday.

"That would concentrate the modified accredited advanced status on those two counties, which by our own estimation here at the Livestock Board, that is the area of risk for tuberculosis," he said. The designation is the next level below TB-free.

The board hopes a decision on the amended status takes only a couple of months, which would be "a very, very fast, sort of an unprecedented fast, response for an endeavor like that," Culbertson said.

Fall is the most common time of year to move cattle in New Mexico, he said.

Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattlegrowers Association, said cattlemen reacted with outrage to "the draconian measures that will severely harm the economy of New Mexico, and particularly rural economies."

"Folks are just very, very upset. I represent the beef side of the New Mexico production and we've got members in northern New Mexico, in western New Mexico, in southern New Mexico, that are literally hundreds of miles from where the disease was diagnosed," she said.

She said producers already are struggling with higher feed and fuel costs.

"And now the government's throwing an additional expensive burden on top. I've had guys tell me they're going to have to reduce the size of their herd," she said.

Bovine TB is considered untreatable, so both infected and non-infected cattle in a herd must be killed.

The highly contagious pulmonary disease causes severe coughing, fatigue, emaciation and debilitation. The disease, which can be fatal, is commonly spread when an infected cow coughs or snorts and other cattle inhale airborne particles. It can be passed from cattle to humans, but a state veterinarian said earlier this year that possibility is "a minimal public health issue."

The livestock industry is New Mexico's single most important agricultural commodity with total annual sales of dairy and beef cattle totaling almost \$2 billion. New Mexico has more than 1.5 million cattle and calves, including 340,000 dairy cows.

The modified accredited advanced designation means breeding cattle 6 months old or older that are leaving the state have to test negative for bovine TB before they can be shipped outside New Mexico's borders, Culbertson said.

Cattle meant to be slaughtered for food are not subject to testing, Culbertson said. That means animals going to feedlots or pastures outside the state and destined for the food chain won't have to be tested, he said.

"We're fortunate the USDA has not included in that test requirement cattle that are in the food chain," Culbertson said. "... The rule could have gone either way."

However, the Livestock Board cautioned cattle producers to check with the state where cattle are being shipped because some states, such as Nebraska, have more stringent testing requirements than the USDA does, he said.

Cowan said anyone who ships cattle out of state will be affected. Producers often "don't want to designate their heifers to the feeder chain and thereby limit their marketability, so anyone could be affected," she said.

Erik Ness, a spokesman for the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau, said there are about 10,000 cattle herds in the state and the new designation will have a tremendous effect.

"This is a costly veterinarian test that would be required," he said. "That's the concern to us because of the current energy price burdens ranchers have to deal with. ... We have no way to pass on those additional costs."

A spokeswoman for the Dairy Producers of New Mexico in Roswell referred questions to the Livestock Board.

No other cow in New Mexico has been found to have TB since the single animal near Clovis in the spring, Cowan and Culbertson stressed. Culbertson said extensive general surveillance tests are being done around the state to confirm that no additional cases are present.

USDA rules require downgraded status if two affected herds are found within 48 months in a TB-free zone or state.

Culbertson said it's hard to nail down the number of cattle affected by the tougher USDA requirements because producers decide whether their herds are breeder or feeder cattle.

Veterinarians typically charge \$4 to \$8 per cow per TB test, depending on such factors as facilities available and distance traveled, he said. That doesn't take into account other costs, such as salaries for extra help or feed for cattle that must be kept close for testing.

"Thousands of our livestock producers will now have to conduct expensive, cumbersome and unnecessary TB tests before shipping their livestock out of state," Richardson said. "This USDA action is out of proportion with the demonstrated low risk of TB among New Mexico's cattle herds."

He also said the action was inconsistent with the USDA's response to similar situations in other states, and called on the agency "to recognize the comprehensive action taken by the state's cattle industry and to review the status as soon as possible."

The downgrading could cost producers more than \$4 million a year, New Mexico's congressional delegation estimated in a letter earlier this year to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Edward Schafer asking him not to take any action on testing that could harm the industry. 9-11-08