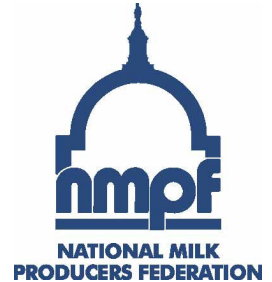




NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

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November 11, 2008

Ed Schafer
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Bovine Tuberculosis

Dear Secretary Schafer,

We are writing in regards to our nation's current bovine tuberculosis (TB) issues and our collective industries concerns for USDA's future Bovine Tuberculosis Program. As you know many of our states and USDA's Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS) are currently dealing with multiple cases of bovine TB in different regions of the country and struggling with issues related to surveillance, control, eradication and prevention of this disease in the nation's cattle population. In addition, APHIS and industry are taking a serious look at how we approach this disease with the tools we currently have available, with an eye towards the future economic realities and the tools that we will need to better address this disease in the future.

The national tuberculosis eradication program has successfully reduced the incidence of the disease in United States (U.S.) cattle, but there continues to be a low incidence of TB as evidenced by the newly identified infected herds over the past several years. As we struggle to deal with the impacts of the current TB episodes in the near term, we are also extremely interested in working with USDA to improve the national TB program to ensure that we meet its long term goal of protecting human and animal health by eradicating the disease from our nation's cattle herd.

In order to have a more concerted effort to achieve the end goal of complete eradication of bovine TB from our U.S. cattle herds, with no recursions, it has become evident that USDA's program needs to be updated, and the antiquated testing methodologies and surveillance tools improved.

The current APHIS program was designed around the absence of TB in our national herd. The Uniform Methods and Rules (UM&R) are outdated, using now invalid assumptions. In fact, recommendations dating from 2004 have never been adopted. Testing and depopulation strategies need to be updated. Because existing 1917-era testing methodologies are also antiquated and inadequate, APHIS's current eradication program preferred method to control TB

is depopulation of the entire herd of cattle when one positive is found. Therefore one positive diagnosis affects many non-infected animals, many non-infected herds and producers, and costs millions of dollars for testing and quarantine. It also affects an entire state due to the current “state status” rules in the UM&R. More sensitive and specific tests would have far-reaching positive affects to all of these.

Surveillance and prevention also needs to be improved. TB control is dependent on adequate surveillance of appropriate populations of cattle and other species, exhaustive attempts to indentify all possible sources of infection and appropriate biosecurity protocols. Bovine TB is a zoonotic disease that can affect cattle, humans and many other species. We know there is a contributing wildlife reservoir and this is becoming more problematic in many states. To date there has not been enough coordinated attention paid to the extra complicities this requires. Surveillance and trace-out capabilities need to be improved. There might also be a human component that needs to be further scientifically evaluated. We promote the development of new diagnostics within and outside of APHIS for TB infection in other species and include these species under the current national eradication program. There is also an urgent need for the exploration of other diagnostic technologies and innovative applications of epidemiology towards eradication of this disease. An improved review of the risk factors that contribute to the spread of this disease, including control methods to protect against the disease, is required. Steps should be taken to more fully examine each of the risk factors that have the potential to propagate the disease now and in the future and help develop program changes to address them.

APHIS recently published a proposed rule regarding indemnity payments being tied to approved herd health plans, and full indemnity payment for depopulation of a producer’s herd would not be done until that producer proved to Federal and/or State officials that the approved herd plan had been followed. Given the inadequacies of knowledge and tools for this disease, this proposed rule is of concern and makes it all the more imperative that adequate information is available regarding other species’ (especially wildlife) roles in bovine TB, and better epidemiological, testing and surveillance tools are made available.

The El Paso, Texas area history is an example of how difficult this disease can be to control even with proper adherence to bioscurity and good herd health plans. It also highlights the complexities regarding adequate biosecurity, the unknown of wildlife components, and another issue of current concern – adequate control of the disease in North America. Our neighbors in Mexico also struggle with bovine TB and many of the U.S. herd positives in recent years have been epidemiologically tied to Mexican strains. Additionally Canada has a wildlife population endemic with TB. Two Canadian-origin feeder heifers were recently found in the U.S. We support APHIS’ creation of a co-industry task force to help the Mexican cattle industry improve programs to control and eradicate TB, and assess and redefine, if appropriate, entry requirements to ensure protection of U.S. livestock. The disease does not recognize borders or certain species, and therefore we need to look at how we can better coordinate and work with our partners in North America to completely eliminate this disease.

The disease also does not recognize state borders. APHIS’ UM&R should be updated in its approach regarding state status when a TB positive animal has been identified. TB funding for states is limited if not non-existent. It has become clear that the U.S. is not free of TB because a number of states have identified new cases of the disease within their borders and the current

federal TB rule is having a tremendous negative impact on producers. Therefore we request that USDA modify the TB rules, including but not limited to the following:

1. The number of herds required to be found infected with TB to trigger a drop in status be based upon a prevalence of herds within a state, as opposed to the current two herds regardless of the number of cattle or herds within a state.
2. The type of cattle operation be considered in the review of the state prior to making a determination to adjust the state status, taking into consideration the impact of cattle confinement versus pasture on the rate and spread of infection.
3. Heifers under six months of age should not require testing.

Additionally there needs to be a streamlined approach for states to regain status. If a herd owner decides to go with the option of test and quarantine instead of depopulating an entire herd, then the industry should be able to operate under that herd quarantine and not put the entire state at risk. We should also be able to have proper procedures in place so that the U.S. can prove to our international partners that we have control of this disease. The OIE has international standards regarding regionalization and compartmentalization relating to disease control and trade. We ask that USDA explore the ideas of regionalization and/or compartmentalization, as appropriate, for this disease, especially in the states that are currently affected.

Currently the USDA TB Program only has \$14 million to control and eradicate this disease. It is evident with the limitations of current technology and the ongoing disease problems in our country, Mexico, and Canada, that this amount of Federal funding is not adequate. We need more funding for the program and adequate, sustained funding for research to provide more answers and better solutions.

We request that USDA ensure adequate funding of the TB program to complete long-standing eradication efforts and better address future needs for the program. This includes adequate U.S. government funding and support of the development and approval of serologic or other tests that would improve specificity and sensitivity over the current testing methodology. These new tests must also eliminate the need for repeat handling of livestock and allow for more rapid test results. The ultimate goal would be to develop a test that would be sensitive enough to allow removal of infected animals without depopulation of entire herds and/or to enable APHIS to explore the possibility of compartmentalization or regionalization in regards to this disease.

We respectfully request that USDA make improved TB diagnostic tests a priority in helping to combat this disease and eradicate it from our U.S. cattle herds. To advance the development of more efficient, accurate and effective diagnostic tests, we support the allocation of funds within USDA to do what is necessary to advance TB testing technology, validate the efficacy of new potential tests and approve successful tests that meet the appropriate regulatory requirements. Improved TB diagnostic tests will actually save tax dollars, as well as minimize cattle losses to this disease. The expenditure of funds to approve an improved test would have far reaching benefits and would be a better long term investment than continuing to fund the depopulation of affected cattle operations.

For years now, our industries have awaited USDA's publication of the comprehensive domestic and international rules for bovine TB. The situation has obviously changed since these rules began the formulation process. While we have repeatedly advocated for their timely release, we are concerned that because they have been so long in the pre-publication process that as

formulated, they will no longer be valid. Therefore we strongly encourage you to consider these steps as you finalize these important rules and develop future plans for combating TB. Specifically we believe the concepts outlined in this letter should be addressed and we encourage USDA to actively work with our industries as you evaluate the current and future bovine TB program.

We sincerely appreciate all of the hard work and efforts APHIS has previously done regarding this disease. Thank you for listening to our concerns and suggestions. We look forward to actively working with USDA to obtain the ultimate goal of expedient eradication of this disease from the U.S. cattle herd as well as its eradication from North America, and ensuring no future recursions in our herds.

Sincerely,



Andy Groseta
President
National Cattlemen's Beef Association



Jerry Kozak
President & CEO
National Milk Producers Federation

Alabama Cattlemen's Association
Arizona Cattle Feeders Association
Arizona Cattle Growers
Arkansas Cattlemen's Association
California Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Livestock Association
Florida Cattlemen's Association
Georgia Cattlemen's Association
Hawaii Cattlemen's Council
Idaho Cattlemen's Association
Illinois Beef Association
Independent Cattlemen's Association of Texas
Iowa Cattlemen's Association
Indiana Beef Cattle Association
Kansas Livestock Association
Kentucky Cattlemen's Association
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Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association