

Maintaining Cattle Biosecurity in the Midst of COVID-19

By: Danelle Bickett-Weddle, DVM, MPH, PhD, DACVPM

Associate Director, Center for Food Security and Public Health, Iowa State University

Background

Dairy farms are run by essential workers who care for, feed, and milk dairy cattle, ensuring that consumers can continue to enjoy safe and wholesome dairy products. The COVID-19 global pandemic is threatening the health of these essential workers.

COVID-19 is not known to cause disease in cattle. COVID-19 is a human disease that causes respiratory symptoms: coughing, fever, shortness of breath, and even death in severe cases. The biosecurity principles that have been used for years to keep cattle healthy can be applied to protect people from COVID-19 while increasing protection from well-known zoonotic diseases cattle can carry like salmonellosis, *E. coli*, and cryptosporidiosis.

Battling an “enemy” you cannot see is hard – think of the dairy as a castle, the workers as the well-trained armored soldiers, and the cattle as the commodity providing milk for the kingdom. Focus on providing the best “armor” – scientifically-based information about the enemy virus, a battle plan to keep soldiers healthy, and protective gear for dangerous situations. Healthy employees and family members are essential to continued cattle health and well-being.

Information

- Write or update communication plans to ensure all employees and family members can contact management and each other. Post the [FARM Emergency Contact Poster](#) prominently in the barn, milkhouse, breakroom, and/or office.
- Discuss with employees and family members about how COVID-19 spreads, the symptoms and how to protect themselves. Visit the [CDC website](#) for updates.
 - Emphasize that employees who feel ill with any of the symptoms listed on the CDC website should not come to work.
 - Recommend that employees and family members follow social distancing and other CDC guidelines when not on the dairy.
- Hang [posters](#) in common areas and in employee housing in their native languages.

Battle Plan

- Limit on-farm personnel to those essential for animal care, milking, feeding, and treatment.
 - When possible, dedicate employees and/or family members to specific areas of the farm to avoid close contact. This practice will help minimize the spread of cattle disease and keep employees and family members safe.
- Write or update Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for essential tasks.
 - Cross-train employees and/or family members to ensure the essential tasks are known and can be safely done by more than one person in case an employee or family member becomes ill.
 - Many protocols used for the [National Dairy FARM Program](#) can be updated to include specific safety measures for COVID-19.
- Give special consideration to areas where social distancing may be more difficult, such as the milking parlor, milkhouse, and break rooms.
- Greet each other with waves, smiles; COVID-19 spreads via fist bumps and handshakes.
- Encourage social distancing for workers who do not reside in the same households – stay one cow length (at least 6 feet) apart.
- [Clean and disinfect](#) common areas and contact surfaces frequently on the dairy and in employee housing (such as the milkhouse, door handles/knobs, steering wheels, break rooms, kitchens, restrooms, time clocks, medication storage, feed mixing equipment, locker facilities, etc.).
- Post signs at entrances discouraging entry unless essential to the dairy business and provide contact information. Less on-farm traffic also benefits cattle health as it reduces the chance of cattle diseases entering on vehicles or people.
- Establish plans with milk and livestock haulers, feed/fuel/propane delivery, reproductive technicians, and other essential farm visitors for entering, exiting and conducting business while maintaining the 6-foot social distance with other individuals and wearing gloves if exiting a vehicle.
- Use telephone or video conferences to talk with advisors (nutritionists, bakers/loan officers, extension personnel, etc.) rather than farm visits.
- Discuss animal health-care needs with your veterinarian and devise a safe plan for farm visits. Use [telemedicine](#) when appropriate.
- Write or update workforce contingency plans to make sure essential tasks can be completed with new or fewer workers. However, be aware that fewer people

doing the same number of tasks can lead to shortcuts in biosecurity, which can affect cattle health.

Protective Gear

- [Cloth masks](#) and gloves should be worn when tasks require close contact between people to prevent spreading the virus, such as in the milking parlor.
 - Safety first! Cloth masks may make it harder to hear. Use hand signals and make sure workers can see each other's hands during a task.
 - Cloth masks should be washed at the end of the day or shift.
- Soap and towels should be provided by all sinks, as well as hand sanitizer when running water is not available. Allow time for frequent handwashing.
 - [CDC: Handwashing posters in multiple languages](#)
- Clothes worn on-farm should be laundered on-farm or transported home in a plastic bag so it can be placed directly into the washer. Footwear should remain on-farm. These biosecurity steps are important for cattle health and well-being.

**This biosecurity factsheet provides additional information to the [NMPF Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Prevention and Management Dairy Farmer Handbook](#).
For more information, visit www.nmpf.org/coronavirus.**