

NM gets split status for bovine TB
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March 20, 2009

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) - The U.S. Department of Agriculture has given New Mexico "split status" for bovine tuberculosis - meaning only two counties in the state will be under strict requirements for moving and testing cattle.

The status, announced Friday, will require bovine TB tests only for cattle shipped from eastern New Mexico's Curry and Roosevelt counties, said Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, D-N.M.

"Good news. We're quite pleased here. This will relieve most of the state from the burden of the reduced status," New Mexico Livestock Board executive director Myles Culbertson said.

Culbertson cautioned, however, that the decision has not been published in the Federal Register, so details weren't known. He expects it to be published next week.

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.

Last September, the USDA removed New Mexico from a list of bovine tuberculosis-free states. New Mexico officials complained that action was excessive and could cost ranching and dairy operations unnecessary tests - particularly for those far from the site of bovine TB.

Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association, called the decision "draconian," and the state's congressional delegation asked the USDA to reconsider, saying the downgrade could cost producers more than \$4 million a year.

The state immediately applied for split status.

Erik Ness, a spokesman for the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau in Las Cruces, said the USDA's latest decision was "a big win for the livestock industry."

"We have a saying around here: You don't need a sledge hammer to tune a piano. That's kind of what was happening," he said.

Cowan said the Cattle Growers' Association was pleased by the split status, which she said will save millions of dollars in testing and handling fees for livestock producers throughout the state.

She said, however, her organization plans to try to change the USDA's TB testing rule, which "has clearly proven unworkable for thousands of cattle producers in the U.S."

Gov. Bill Richardson credited the New Mexico Livestock Board and its state veterinarian staff for "relentless efforts" on behalf of the livestock industry.

"At a time of economic uncertainty, this decision will save millions of dollars for the New Mexico dairy and beef industries in the state, while continuing to assure the consuming public of safe, wholesome food products," he said.

Culbertson said the decision "came at the end of a lot of discussion and work with the USDA to be able to establish the parameters for assurance no risk of TB in the rest of the state. So there will be some pretty significant surveillance activity by the Livestock Board."

States that accept cattle from New Mexico also make their own rules. Culbertson said he expects receiving states to acknowledge the TB-free status for most of New Mexico, but added, "It's important to caution that they do make their own rules and so we'll have to wait for that."

The Livestock Board will contact all those states over the next few days, he said.

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

The USDA said last year 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.

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

The Livestock Board traced the cattle that infected cow might have been in contact with, "and we never found another infection," Culbertson said.

Bovine TB, a highly contagious pulmonary disease, causes severe coughing, fatigue, emaciation and debilitation. The disease, which can be fatal, is 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 that possibility is "a minimal public health issue."

Since the disease is considered untreatable, both infected and non-infected cattle in a herd must be killed.