

Don't Put Off Setting Up a Biosecurity Plan

By Dr. Oliver Schunicht

All of the publicity associated with foot and mouth disease (FMD) has emphasized the importance of biosecurity programs in disease prevention. In the context of a serious foreign animal disease, such as FMD, it goes without saying that the appropriate steps to minimize the risk of FMD virus entering Canada, and subsequently entering a livestock operation in Canada, must be taken.

However, there are many infectious diseases that occur commonly in Canada that receive very little attention in terms of what procedures should be implemented to minimize the spread of these diseases. What steps are you taking to prevent the introduction and spread of infectious diseases on your farm?

The introduction of a new disease onto a livestock operation usually occurs through the movement of animals, people, or fomites (trucks, equipment, clothing, boots, et cetera) from a diseased herd to a naive herd that has not been previously exposed to the disease. Maintaining a closed herd, where the movement of animals, people, or fomites into the herd is very restricted, has been one approach used by the swine industry (specific pathogen-free herds) to minimize the risk of disease transmission.

Although this approach to disease control has been very effective in the swine industry, it may not be applicable to the beef industry, where animals are primarily raised outdoors. However, we can develop a common sense approach to decrease the risk of the transmission of infectious diseases into the beef herd.

New animals (bulls, replacement heifers, cows or feeder cattle) can be isolated or quarantined before they are introduced into the existing herd. Purchasing animals from herds with a known health status can limit the risk of disease transmission. Management practices should also focus on minimizing the exposure of the herd to other animals that may be a source of various diseases.

Commingling of herds, which occurs in community pasture situations, may increase the risk of disease transmission between herds. Questioning visitors and employees regarding their exposure to other livestock herds can be utilized to reduce the risk of introducing new diseases to the herd. Also, cleaning and disinfecting boots, coveralls, trucks, equipment and so on that originate from a diseased herd, or not allowing these fomites to come in contact with your herd, can minimize the risk of disease transmission.

The specific biosecurity plan to be employed by each livestock operation must consider the type of operation (cow-calf operation, beef feedlot), the disease status of herd itself, and the practicality and cost-effectiveness of the procedures to be utilized to minimize the transmission of disease.