

Brucellosis: eradication may be just around the corner

WASHINGTON, D.C. — "The time is ripe for a special commitment by farmers and ranchers to end their 50-year struggle with cattle brucellosis," says a U.S. Department of Agriculture official.

Brucellosis can be eliminated, according to Bert W. Hawkins, administrator of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. His agency coordinates state-federal cooperative efforts aimed at control and ultimate eradication of the disease.

Hawkins said several European countries — principally exporters of meat and dairy products — have wiped out brucellosis. And Canada, with no known infection since March 1984, may soon be another example of successful eradication.

"But we don't have to go outside the United States to find success stories," said Hawkins. "Nineteen states (including Pennsylvania) and the U.S. Virgin Islands are classified 'brucellosis free' — meaning no known infection for at least one year. Another 21 states and Puerto Rico, rated Class A, have very low herd infection rates — less than 2½ infected herds per thousand."

States rated Free and Class A contain more than 60 percent of the nation's breeding cattle, including both beef and dairy breeds, he said.

Hawkins said a Class B rating means there are 2½ to 15 infected herds per thousand. States are rated Class C when there are 16 or more infected herds per thousand.

Sometimes called Bang's disease, brucellosis causes infected cows to abort or give birth to weak calves. It also reduces milk yields.

But brucellosis isn't confined to cattle, Hawkins said. Other

animals and humans can acquire the disease. Human symptoms include fever, aches, chills and fatigue bordering on exhaustion.

"We've truly come a long way since the mid-1930s, when more than 11 percent of the cattle and 45 percent of the dairy herds in the United States were infected with brucellosis," Hawkins said.

The first efforts at controlling brucellosis on a national scale began in 1934. But it wasn't until 1950 that the eradication drive got its first big push, when the Chicago Board of Health said that within five years only milk from brucellosis-free herds would be acceptable for human consumption.

"This stimulated states in the northern dairy belt to begin working earnestly to eliminate brucellosis. Today, more than 80 percent of the nation's dairy herds are located in free or Class A states," said Hawkins.

"By contrast, a few primarily beef states with year-round grass, year-round calving, many cow-calf operations and frequent cattle sales were slow getting started with eradication," he said. "Recently, however, these states also have been showing signs of dramatic progress."

"Mississippi, for instance, has an excellent chance of moving from Class C to Class B this year. Already in 1985, Kansas, Georgia and Tennessee have moved from Class B to Class A."

"Minnesota recently became the 19th state to gain Free status. Three other states — Montana, New Jersey and Wyoming — are in the count-down phase of going 12 months with no known infection," Hawkins said.

At the end of fiscal year 1984, the infection rate in market cattle

stood at 0.29 percent — down from 0.37 percent the year before, and down from 5 percent 30 years ago.

"We're so close to wiping out brucellosis in the United States. I'd like to see a push in the next five years to finish the job," said Hawkins. "But it will take commitment at every level: state, federal and industry."

"The push will call for different emphasis, depending upon a state's classification and the degree of risk involved. Continuing

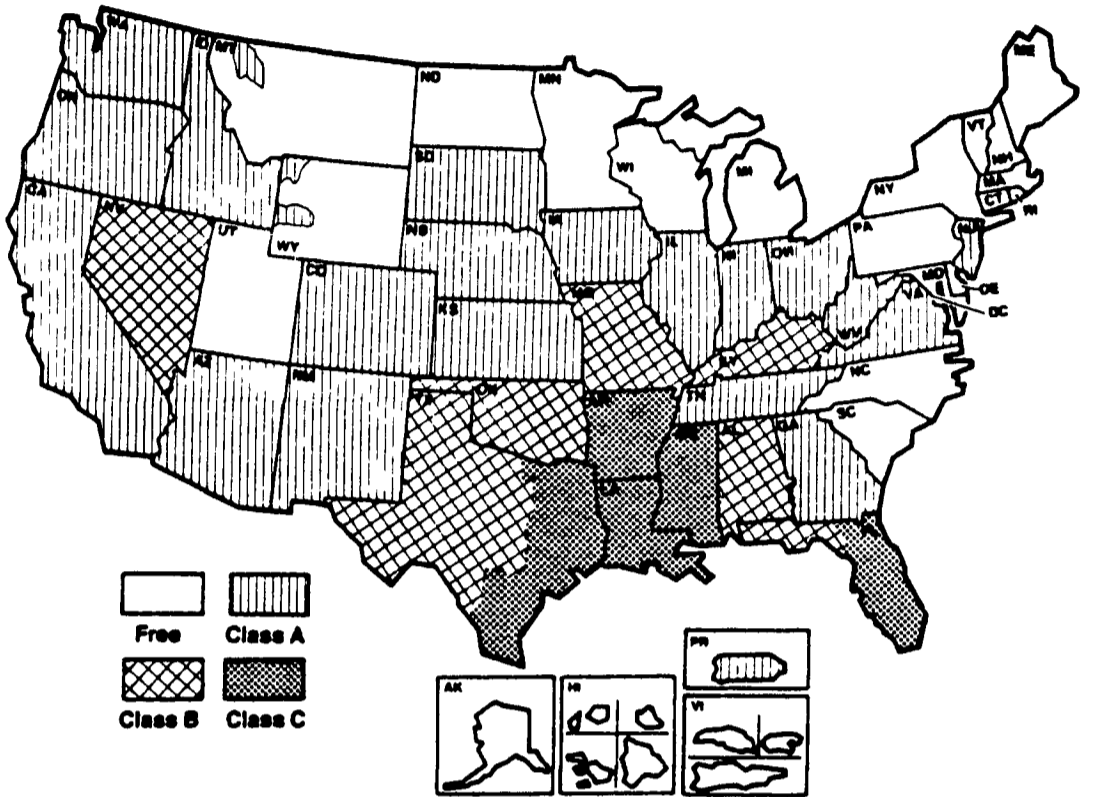
vaccination is important in areas of moderate- to high-risk and for producers selling cattle to these areas."

Hawkins said that for states with only a few remaining brucellosis-affected herds, he would urge elimination of entire herds to quickly remove potential sources of spread. Some federal indemnity funds for this purpose are still available this fiscal year, he said.

Hawkins cautioned that officials and producers in Free states

cannot afford to relax, they must remain continuously on guard against re-introduction of brucellosis. Any outbreak in Free or Class A states should be viewed with alarm and treated as an emergency, he said.

"And I'd urge farmers and ranchers in all states to suspect brucellosis any time a cow aborts or gives birth to a weak calf," he said. "With your diligence and cooperation, we'll see the end of this menace once and for all."



Map shows current state classifications for cattle brucellosis.

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