Animal Health System Always at the Ready

Just like firefighters and paramedics, the nation's animal health regulatory people stand by around the clock waiting to spring into action on the next emergency call. Last week they were activated by the report of Mad Cow Disease discovered in a beef cow slaughtered in the Canadian province of Alberta.

In minutes federal and state officials were swarming all over the situation, conferring with counterparts in Canada and other nations, sealing the border to imports of live animals and meat products and dealing with a storm of news media questions.

Listening in on a conference call involving USDA and FDA officials and state veterinarians including New Hampshire's Dr. Cliff McGinnis the next morning I was impressed with the calm professionalism and the grasp these people had of all aspects of the situation, from the science of the disease to the economic impacts to the politics.

At a time when everybody enjoys knocking "the gummint" it's reassuring to watch the front lines of defense for animal health and food safety holding up and skillfully doing the jobs they're intended to do.

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Symptomatic of the general malaise in the dairy industry, dried whey has sunk in value to the point where farmers are being assessed the cost of getting rid of it. USDA recently increased what's called the make allowance, which is a cost credit for cheese manufacturers on the farm milk they process.

Historically the value of whey, a byproduct of making cheese, exceeded the make allowance and added to producers' pay prices. Not now, though, as the make allowance is a fraction of a cent higher than the market price for dried whey. Milk check stubs that used to include a credit for "other solids" are showing a negative number in that block and are likely to continue to for the next several months.

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Elsewhere on the dairy front, USDA Farm Service Agency data show that New Hampshire milk producers collected $3,854,623 in federal payments in 2002. This sum included the so-called transition payment, plus the December 2001 Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) payment and 12 months of '02 payments.

Nationwide, FSA doled out $1.3 billion to dairy producers in 2002. Wisconsin was the biggest recipient at $262 million. New York got $125 million, Pennsylvania $108 million and Minnesota $104 million. The nation's biggest dairy state, California, got only $111 million because of the 2.4 million-pound cap per farm; most farms in the Golden State bumped up against the cap with a month's production or less.

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The Abbie Sargent Memorial Scholarships sponsored by New Hampshire Farm Bureau go to four collegians this year. They are Shawn Bersaw of Franklin, a dairy management major at SUNY Morrisville; Emily Anne Cook of Alstead, a UNH ag major; Morgan Cram of Melvin

Village, a UNH biochemistry student; and Julie Heath of Goshen, studying veterinary technology at Vermont Tech.

Each of these young people has a superior academic record and lots of experience in 4-H, FFA and other worthwhile activities.

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Consumers expect native sweet corn earlier and earlier, so more and more New Hampshire growers are doing transplants under row covers and seeding into plastic to capture the high-value mid-July trade. A Connecticut Valley farm had 17,000 corn transplants in the ground by May 8, representing a lot of labor but mighty lucrative if ears are ready in time to catch the top of the market.

Steve Taylor, Commissioner