Column Name- The Heartland Minute

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"Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Cattle"

As a society we are not very far removed from a COVID-19 pandemic that likely put many of us on high alert for new diseases popping up in the world, be it in humans or animals. That higher level of awareness may have made some of you aware of new stories announcing that traces of the influenza virus have been appearing in unexpected places.

Those unexpected places turn out to be occurrences of the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus (HPAI) being identified in dairy cattle. You may have heard of HPAI having a distinct affect on the poultry industry stemming all the way back to 2015 when it was first identified in a commercial flock in California. The virus was named such as it results in a high mortality rate for birds. It often moves from wild birds that bring it through the flyways to commercial poultry operations, leading to that high death loss. On March 25, 2024, it was announced that HPAI was detected in laboratory samples obtained from some affected dairy cows in Texas and Kansas. Findings in Kansas were first detected in unpasteurized, clinical samples of milk collected from two dairy farms.

This detection highlights the importance of stringent biosecurity measures and vigilant monitoring of disease. Do not hesitate to consult your veterinarian if something seems off. Sick cows are primarily older animals, in mid-lactation, showing decreased lactation, high fever, and low appetite. Dairy farms reporting disease instance have also reported finding deceased wild birds on their properties. There is currently no indication that the changes to the virus have made it more transmissible to humans. Also, steps have been taken to ensure that milk from impacted animals is being diverted or destroyed and not allowed to enter the food supply. As such, there is no concern about the safety of the commercial milk supply, coupled with the fact required pasteurization has continually proven to inactivate bacteria and viruses, such as influenza, in milk.

Beef producers need to recognize that diseases are complex and can take time to figure out. At this time the USDA APHIS has developed regulations regarding interstate and intrastate movement of lactating dairy cattle. It is important to note that cooking studies have been conducted where ground beef was inoculated with HPAI and cooked to an appropriate 145 – 160 Fahrenheit range. With proper cooking no virus was detected. Also, beef supply samples have been taken from various retail outlets in states with reported cases of HPAI and no virus was detected after testing. There have been no reports of symptoms in beef cattle, and the nationwide beef supply is safe, wholesome, and unaffected. However, it is important to stay diligent and watch for signs that something seems amiss.

Information comes from K-State University beef cattle experts with the Beef Cattle Institute: Dr. Bob Larson, Dr. Brad White, and Dr. Brian Lubbers. Also, from K-State Beef Extension Veterinarian, Dr. AJ Tarpoff, the USDA APHIS website, and AVMA website.