

Biosecurity on Dairies – Can We Afford Not To Think About It?

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A recent article in *Dairy Herd Management* focused on the ten biggest mistakes in crisis communication for all types of businesses¹. The author mentions that every business is vulnerable to various types of crisis such as accusations of impropriety, terrorism and other volatile situations. When these things happen, it is the author's contention that the business finds itself in the court of public opinion. It seems that the dairy biosecurity issue certainly falls within the concern of the author. Let's examine the some of the issues of concern.

1. Play ostrich – just keep quiet and appear like you don't care. Right now, most of the dairy industry is at the very best only giving lip-service to biosecurity. A few dairies have put up signs telling trucks where to enter the dairy and for visitors to keep out or report to a certain location on the dairy. Most dairies are wide open for anyone who cares to enter and move around the dairy. Cows, feeds and bulk tank milk are vulnerable to abuse.
2. Only address a potential crisis after it becomes public – waiting until the crisis occurs removes any possibility to take some proactive steps. Proactive steps might put the dairy industry in a better position to defend itself if it can show that some biosecurity measures are already in place. Many articles on dairy biosecurity are readily available. The California Dairy Quality Assurance Program also has information on biosecurity.
3. Let your reputation speak for you – Martha Stewart recently proved that this doesn't work. Milk has a wonderful reputation, but there are those individuals who would relish taking it down at any opportunity.
4. Treat the media like an enemy – it is important for the dairy industry to take every opportunity to show itself in a positive fashion to public. By and large, the media is the vehicle that gives the image to the public. Whenever possible, give the media the story that the dairy industry wants to put before the public. We need some positive biosecurity stories to tell.
5. Assume that truth will triumph over all – just because the facts may be on our side does not mean that the public will eventually come around to our side. While the industry is deciding to adopt some biosecurity issues and present them to the public, negative perceptions will be just as damaging as the actual reality. In the absence of wide acceptance of dairy biosecurity, we have little to tell.
6. Get stuck in a reaction mode – we can avoid merely reacting to a crisis by initiating programs to prevent them. Once a crisis occurs, we can only respond. Then there will

probably be follow-up questions. And we respond again. This puts us in a position that looks like we are defending ourselves. Each time there is an anticipated media event that may cast a negative image on the dairy industry; I get a suggested canned response for the media from our dairy spokesmen. This is purely a reactionary mode that should be replaced by positive action by the industry.

So how can the California dairy industry begin to develop a positive image about biosecurity for the industry as well as the consumers? The start is to get a leader that will coordinate a unified effort. The California Dairy Quality Assurance program has successfully taken the lead on several important projects and could provide the leadership for biosecurity as well. The CDQAP could take the lead to develop the key points of the message and insure they are repeatedly told in a consistent manner.

Across the industry, dairy organizations should take every opportunity to spotlight the achievements of the industry as well as their overall concern for milk and beef quality and safety. The dairy industry needs a positive face for the public to see. Proactively, the industry can direct the type of information that is passed through the media to the public. It has to be planned as it will not just happen. An additional step will be to continually monitor consumer concerns so that any potential crisis point can be anticipated.

The dairy industry can still take proactive steps to prevent these crisis mistakes. Only a few days ago, we remembered the events of 911. The current dangers or threats from intentional or unintentional introduction of harmful pathogens or substances onto dairies are well documented. Abundant and accessible information on dairy biosecurity is readily available for application on dairies². So we can wait like the ostrich until the crisis occurs and hope that the industry reputation will carry us through until we can react or the industry can begin now to take step to prepare in advance of the crisis. Keep in mind that many people believe that under the current world-wide circumstances it is only a matter of time before a foreign animal disease like Foot and Mouth will occur in the US.

¹Bernstein J. The 10 biggest mistakes in crisis communication. Dairy Herd Management 41(9): 10, 2004.

²www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vetext/INF-DA.html