The Benefits of Official Calfhood Vaccination

States who require OCV tattoo: AZ, AR*, CA, CO, ID, LA, MT, NV, ND, OR, WA, WY (*AR requires the tattoo if the animal does not originate from Brucellosis. free state.)

When buying cattle from Jersey Marketing Service (JMS), other sale managers, or from fellow breeders directly, you must know the health requirements for your state. Some states require cattle over certain ages to have an Official Calftbod Vaccination (OCV), and will not allow the movement of breeding stock into that state without it.

The Jersey Journal recently spoke with Annette B. Jones, D.V.M, California State Veterinarian, Director, Animal Health and Food Safety Services, California Department of Food and Agriculture about why an OCV was required in California. David Allen, Reedsburg, Wis., and Libby Milroy, North Platte, Neb., also weighed in on why calfhood vaccination is important to their herds.

Dr. Jones: Brucellosis vaccination of cattle is mandated in California with support from the cattle industry. A tattoo is the method of permanent identification required by the program to show vaccine status. This method evolved because ear tags can fall off, and cattle owners wanted a way to still prove their animals had been vaccinated.

The continuing industry support for brucellosis vaccination in California reflects continuing perceived risk from the Greater Yellowstone Brucellosis Control Area (GYA) and potentially from illegal importation. Twenty-two brucellosis affected cattle and bison herds have been identified in the GYA vicinity since 2002. The number of affected domestic herds is probably due to increases in disease prevalence in elk populations and in elk contact with domestic herds. Animals from herds that tested positive for brucellosis in 2011 and 2012 traces back to 16 states, threatening the brucellosis-free status of the rest of the country. Unfortunately, it is difficult to mitigate transmission of disease and stop the continued spread of brucellosis from wildlife; so one of the best ways to protect a herd is by increasing immunity via calfhood vaccination.

California receives cattle from interstate and international movement, thus California incurs the disease risks associated with those imports, making this herd immunity particularly important. Our vigorous imports are one key reason that brucellosis vaccination is still mandatory in California. Furthermore, the vaccine adds assurance to potential cattle buyers, as well as milk handlers, that the herd owner is investing in animal health and food safety. It is also important to remember that B. abortus is a major human health threat and can have negative market consequences particularly for dairy cattle.

If a dairy manager maintains a completely closed herd (that means completely, no exceptions), cull cattle only go directly to harvest and the dairy is isolated from any potentially infected wildlife or neighboring cattle of unknown disease status, then I would agree that calfhood vaccination has limited benefits. On the other hand, vaccination can be particularly beneficial if a dairy manager is engaged in herd improvement via outside replacement heifers. In that case, the cost of vaccination may be worth the disease control assurance that calfhood vaccination brings. Also, more importantly, if a dairy manager markets heifers with breeding potential, a calfhood vaccination program will keep all buyers at the table, potentially making additional pricing options available. Ideally, calves, as opposed to adults, should be vaccinated for brucellosis as that is when the most consistent immune response can be obtained without potential for abortion. Plus, some states, like California, do not currently allow adult cattle to be vaccinated.

Even as we continue to reduce the incidence of brucellosis positive cattle in the United States, and states continue to end their mandatory vaccination programs, brucellosis vaccination may continue to make good sense for many producers. Disease can slip into herds in surprising ways and one of the best ways to reduce that risk related to brucellosis is calfhood vaccination.

David Allen: One of the primary reasons that our herd is calfhood vaccinated (even though the state of Wisconsin does not require it) is to allow for full marketability of our herd’s genetics. By vaccinating for Brucellosis as a calf, our Jersey cattle are able to be purchased by breeders in any state, since several require the OCV tattoo to be visible. Also, while the vet is vaccinating the calves for Brucellosis, all other necessary vaccines are also administered, giving me the confirmation of having that important health milestone checked off the calf’s calendar.

Libby Milroy: As a breeder of Registered Jerseys, I own and raise breeding animals. Nebraska does not require female animals to have an OCV to enter the state, however I have determined that I will not knowingly purchase or sell any female animals that are of age without the OCV. I have made this deliberate decision for two main reasons: 1.) Market-ability. There are many states that require an OCV to enter the state. In my case, many of those states are very close to Nebraska and I want the flexibility to be able to sell to buyers in those states. Vaccinating for Brucellosis is simple and economical and allows me to market to the entire United States. I would never want to limit my market by not including sales to those states. 2.) Due Diligence. Brucellosis is almost eradicated in the U.S. I say “almost” as I am not sure we can ever be completely rid of it with the free ranging population of bison and also the ever-spreading wild population of elk. For that reason, I feel that livestock producers that are producing female animals for breeding purposes need to continue to vaccinate their females for Brucellosis. There is a reason that the eradication program worked and that was due to the livestock producers being vigilant in their vaccination protocols.

The producers have worked very hard since the 1950s to create a healthier product and they have seen the market share and profitability increase due to that hard work. If we discontinue our vaccination program for breeding animals, it wouldn’t take very long to spiral down with only a few incidents.

I sell many of my animals to people that want a family cow, that produce raw milk for re-sale ($16.00 per gallon in some states) or for themselves. I feel a strong obligation to provide them with the most protected cow I can. Even though the Brucellosis vaccine is not 100% effective in preventing Brucellosis, it is better than no protection at all.

I feel that I also owe it to all the other livestock producers in the state of Nebraska to maintain the highest quality herd that I can. I would hate to be the farm that caused my state to lose its status as the economic impact that would have on thousands of families in Nebraska would be huge. I also owe it to my cattle to keep them as protected as possible. If Brucellosis is detected, liquidation is the only option and a lot of good, valuable animals would be eliminated.

The world of cattle breeding is getting so much smaller thanks to the internet and internet bidding so it is possible now to sell animals to every corner of the U.S. and North America. As a
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America. As a breeder, I believe that whatever I can do to make my animals more marketable and more available to every person, in every state, puts dollars in my pocket. I wouldn’t want to lose a sale to person who lived in a state due to non-fulfillment an OCV requirement when that vaccination only cost me $2.50 per head.

From a health standpoint, a producer will be called upon by regulators, neighbors and consumers alike to maintain the highest health standards possible for animals and dairy products since that effort starts at the producer. Therefore, a producer would find it almost impossible to defend against liability or public/private criticism for having failed to take the obvious OCV step when that simple, easy and inexpensive step expected by all could have been added to the producer’s other health and safety protocols. Comparatively, one’s pocketbook and reputation cannot stand such an avoidable risk.

Our contributors:
Annette B. Jones, D.V.M., is the California State Veterinarian and Director of Animal Health and Food Safety Services for the California Department of Food and Agriculture. She graduated with honors from U.C. Davis with an undergraduate degree in Economics and a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine.

After practicing as a private veterinarian, she joined the California Department of Food and Agriculture in 2001. In 2002, Dr. Jones showed her willingness to accept challenge during the response to Exotic Newcastle disease in southern California, where she was the Incident Commander and Area Commander for the state. The response involved multiple local, State, and Federal agencies with up to 1,500 people on the ground at one time.

In 2004, Dr. Jones was appointed Director of the Animal Health and Food Safety Services. In this capacity, she oversees an annual budget of $42.9 million and 229 employees engaged in programs for animal health; milk and dairy food safety; meat, poultry and egg safety; and livestock identification. She also works closely with the California Animal Health and Food Safety Laboratory System, which is operated by U.C. Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine, under a contract with her Division.

Currently, Dr. Jones is also the chair of the board for the National Institute of Animal Agriculture, and on the executive committee of the United States Animal Health Association.

Libby Milroy was born and raised in Arizona. Growing up, her family ranch and ran a cow-calf beef operation. She moved to Nebraska to complete her master’s degree and sent most of her career in higher education. The past 10 years of Libby’s career has been spent in the field of medical education with a regional medical center. Libby and her husband, Ron, live on 160 acres where they raise Registered Jerseys and breed, train and compete with American Field Labradors.

David Allen and his family have been involved with the Jersey breed since 1984, striving for quality over quantity. The 50-cow herd has ranked nationally for production and the All Lynns prefix has been on some of the top selling cattle in many public sales. Embryos have been marketed nationally and internationally and many bulls have been sold to the A.I. industry.

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