

FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE (FMD) AS A HAZARD FOR NEW ENGLAND DAIRIES

ABSTRACT

This document is intended to add a New England perspective to plans and preparations for emergencies, particularly Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD). It provides background for understanding the vulnerability of regional dairies and suggests ways to sustain them if an FMD outbreak occurs. Research and outreach for this analysis were funded through a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the state of Maine on behalf of the region as a whole.

Although the U.S. has been free of FMD for more than eighty years and the disease does not represent a significant threat to human health, there is good reason for concern about infections of this sort and FMD in particular. The disease can cause tremendous damage. Many animals, including the most common farm livestock are susceptible. The rest of the world remains a giant reservoir of many strains of the FMD virus. These strains are hardy and spread quickly, but they are also difficult to monitor. Mutation and contagion can outpace existing surveillance and testing capacity. The risk of disease transmission seems to be rising with the range, pace, and volume of global trade and transportation as well as threats of bioterrorism. Unfortunately, too, vaccination is not yet an attractive option for preventing it. An outbreak seems likely for the U.S. sooner or later. It will have fearsome consequences and staggering costs for the dairy industry, consumers, and tax-payers as well as the animals themselves.

New England is an important participant in the dairy industry as well as home to a uniquely valued and vulnerable part of it. Contrary to popular belief, New England dairy farms and processors resemble the rest of the nation in many respects. If the six states were considered one, its dairy industry would be typical for an “ordinary” state. Still, with respect to vulnerability to FMD, New England differs in a few key respects:

- Economic distress: Lower profitability, higher property values and intense development pressure increase the challenge of protecting farms and restoring any that become emergency casualties.
- Divided authority: The small size of New England states and weakness of county government increases the challenge of coordinating emergency response across relevant jurisdictions.
- Separation of production and processing: Dependence on frequent interstate milk transport increases the challenge to business continuity in an emergency.

Three strategies are recommended to improve the sustainability of New England dairies:

1. Tighten the coordination of state preparations for responding to Foot-and-Mouth Disease (e.g., endorse the USDA/APHIS “Red Book” as the center of all response plans in the region).
2. Develop, adopt and exercise a uniform region-wide plan for issuing permits to move milk – both intra- and inter-state – from farms to processors with precautions that minimize the risk of contagion (e.g., in coordination with the national Secure Milk Supply Plan).
3. Plan to preserve the diversity of existing dairy farms and processors, especially a mix of large and small, national and locally oriented operations (e.g., in priorities for issuing permits and support of biosecurity improvements).

Appended to this document are more fine-grained and comprehensive analyses of New England livestock, dairy farms, their performance and personnel, as well as international, national, and state statutes, regulations and guidance documents for FMD response.