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COVID-19 Confirms Relevance of Animal Health Emergency Management Resources

Producers and Associations see value in proactive approach

(Cochrane, AB) – Like many Canadians, livestock organizations, producers and farmers have been deeply impacted by COVID-19.

“Whether it’s staff unable to work, quality milk getting dumped due to altered restaurant ordering patterns or livestock bottlenecked at feedlots waiting for temporarily closed processing plants to reopen, the pandemic has been challenging,” says Animal Health Emergency Management Project Co-manager Mikki Shatosky. “It’s been an extremely fluid situation that has given our industry new insight and sparked awareness about the potential impact of a disease outbreak within the animal population.”

Be it dealing with the ripple effect from COVID-19 or a serious animal health threat like Foot and Mouth Disease, there is a growing understanding that preparation is key.

“More and more people are actively seeking out ways to protect their animals, staff and livelihood,” adds Shatosky. “They are doing everything in their control to improve their ability to respond quickly and effectively.”

Launched in April 2019, the Animal Health Emergency Management (AHEM) project is helping to equip industry professionals with knowledge and tools to handle adverse events. The four-year project is focused on collaborative development of practical resources, policies and training that will support producers, industry associations and animal health specialists.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, AHEM team members have noticed a definite uptick in project interest and participation. Proactive emergency management is top of mind for producers and industry associations alike.

“Early this year, we hosted a handful of producer workshops where we conducted specific emergency scenario exercises and familiarized participants with our AHEM Producer Handbook,” says Shatosky. “However, since COVID-19 and recognizing the need for physical distancing, we’ve now moved to an online platform.”

The AHEM Serious Animal Disease Webinar is designed to help boost readiness for an emergency event. The free, hour-long online session introduces livestock producers and association staff to serious animal disease concepts including emergency stages, incident response and valuable animal health emergency management resources.

While most AHEM resources focus on serious animal disease events, there are several sections that can easily apply to different emergencies such as border closures, extreme weather, wildfire or even human illnesses.

These informative resources provide far more than disease response guidance. In fact, producers report that having a plan for one emergency event can reduce confusion, stress, and economic impacts from other emergency situations.

“I have reached for our provincial animal health emergency management plan more than any other document since the pandemic began,” explains Kevin Boon, General Manager of the BC Cattlemen’s Association. “The information within this document has been key for our office staff as they receive calls from producers dealing with the pandemic on ranches across the province.”

Boon stresses the importance of advance thought and preparation. “It’s far easier to come up with solutions and risk reduction strategies when you’re not in the middle of an emergency,” he says. “Through the AHEM project producers are able to work through scenarios and identify potential pinch points within their operations and beyond without added pressure.”

While the AHEM project is bringing a new focus on emergency planning, preparedness and response, the evolving COVID-19 disease landscape is also proving to be an effective teacher.

“The pandemic has given the animal agriculture sector a crash course on just how disruptive a serious animal disease outbreak could be to day-to-day and longer-term operations,” says Shatosky. “Some of the topics we cover in the resources are now more tangible because people have seen the disease effect firsthand.”

Visit www.animalhealth.ca for more information about the project and the upcoming webinar schedule.

Funded through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership’s AgriAssurance Program, the Animal Health Emergency Management project is a four-year initiative that launched in April 2019. This work is managed through the National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Council and will deliver value to producers, industry associations and communities across Canada.

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