

Animal Disease and Public Policy



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It's a privilege to be here this noon with a group that has shown such professional spirit and such rapid growth as your own. It's a particular privilege to be on the same program with Alice in Dairyland. It's a little difficult to share this platform with her; she's so healthy that it is hard to keep my mind on a topic like animal disease.

Each of you has made a tremendous commitment to the health and well being of this nation. Many Americans do not understand this. When they think of veterinarians they think of their neighbor and good friend who runs a pet hospital. As a nation we tend to take our food supply for granted. Too many Americans do not realize the crucial role of the veterinary profession in assuring a safe and plentiful food supply. Too many have never thought about the importance of animal health not only to our food supply but also to our whole style of living.

Just look at what has happened to beef consumption in the past 20 years. In 1950 Americans consumed 63 pounds of beef per person. By 1960, that figure had gone up to 85 pounds per person. Today, Americans consume 115 pounds of beef per person per year. That increase could not have occurred without you.

It is the veterinarians in this room who have made possible the healthy livestock population which allows this nation to maintain the standard of living that we take for granted. It is the veterinary profession and the livestock industry which have made it possible to meet the ever-increasing consumer demand for beef. It is a job well done. It is an example of our free enterprise and free market system at their best. The government control in all this has been minimal. The government has set neither prices nor quotas, and this is the way it should be.

Your contribution to the successful status of

the bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis eradication efforts is greatly appreciated by both the cattle industry and the animal health officials of this country. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is particularly appreciative because we know we could not have progressed this far toward eradication without your help. The role you have played in improving the fertility of the cattle herd of the nation has added to the abundance of meat and milk that we enjoy.

As you know, the government has an important role in animal health. But that role, like so much in the field of animal health and animal disease, is not well known nor much discussed. In a way that is surprising because the government's role in the eradication and prevention of animal disease is not only important, but at times dramatic.

Right now two Americans are busy in scientific exploration on the surface of the Moon. When they return to Earth they will be taken to a quarantine laboratory in Houston. That facility was built at great expense to be sure that nothing was brought back from outer space which would endanger life or well being on this planet. Three years ago in 1969 when Apollo 11 made the first trip to the Moon, the best selling novel in the country was *The Andromeda Strain*. It was a fictional account of a national crisis precipitated by an organism brought back from outer space on an unmanned satellite.

Despite the drama of such threats from outer space, few people focus on the fact that every day USDA scientists are protecting the food supply and well being of this nation against the introduction of animal and plant pests and disease which could prove catastrophic.

Think for just a moment about plant disease. It is cruelly fortunate that the two great national plant epidemics of this century, the Chestnut

Blight and Dutch Elm Disease, have attacked shade trees and not food crops. It is fortunate that resistant strains of seed corn were available to prevent a re-occurrence of the corn blight in 1972. You know the impact a continuing corn blight would have on our production of meat and poultry.

You are more familiar with the threats of pests and disease which attack animals and poultry—for example, Exotic Newcastle disease, screw-worm, and foot-and-mouth disease. Let me describe briefly what USDA is doing right now to deal with and guard against such diseases.

Earlier this year, on March 14, Secretary Butz initiated an emergency program to eradicate Exotic Newcastle disease, which had gained an extensive foothold in Southern California. At its peak this emergency program put 45,000 square miles under quarantine and employed around 1,300 people. Since March 14, USDA has spent more than \$25 million eradicating this disease in Southern California. The quarantine area has now been reduced to 1,700 square miles, less than 5% of the maximum area once under quarantine. More important, the threat that this disease might spread all over the United States has eased substantially. If Exotic Newcastle disease were to become established in the United States, it would have a cost of \$500-\$800 million per year—year after year. This cost would be passed on to consumers in the form of more expensive poultry and poultry products.

Many of you are aware that screwworms have been a particular problem this past year. Nearly 100,000 cases of screwworm maggots were reported in the United States during the summer. Screwworms were found in the Southeastern states for the first time since 1959.

In August, the governments of the United States and Mexico signed an agreement which will have an important effect on the screwworm problem. At present the United States attempts to maintain a 2,000-mile-long screwworm barrier along the Mexican border. This barrier is maintained with massive air drops of sterile male screwworm flies, a technique which has been proven effective in eradicating screwworm populations. As a result of the agreement signed in August, the Mexican and U.S. governments will join in using sterile flies to eradicate screwworms from most of Mexico and establish a new barrier across the 135-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This will take five years to accomplish. The benefits are obvious. There will be a 135-mile barrier instead of a 2,000-mile barrier. The annual savings are expected to exceed \$5 million.

The most feared of all threats to our cattle population is foot-and-mouth disease. And yet, despite its seriousness, most Americans suspect this is a political affliction and not an animal disease.

The last outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United States occurred in 1929. It was eradicated. Since then we have been successful in preventing any reintroduction. And this is good. The consequences of a foot-and-mouth outbreak today would be far more serious than the consequences of that last outbreak in 1929.

Today, animals move so far and so quickly in commerce that it is entirely possible that huge numbers of animals might be exposed to the disease before anyone would be aware of the threat. This means that it is ever more important to assure that no animal which may have been exposed to foot-and-mouth disease enters the United States.

As a result of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Mexico, the Mexico-United States Commission to Eradicate Food-and-Mouth Disease was formed on April 2, 1947. Foot-and-mouth disease was not finally eradicated in Mexico until 1954. Today, the United States works with the governments of Mexico, Canada, and several of the Central American Republics to assure that all of North and Central America are free of this disease.

In 1954, while foot-and-mouth disease was being finally eliminated from Mexico, the Department of Agriculture began construction of a foreign disease research laboratory particularly directed toward foot-and-mouth. This facility is located at Plum Island, New York. Plum Island is located off Long Island and is protected by tight security arrangements which are designed to assure that no disease bearing material escapes to the United States mainland. Plum Island is like science fiction but it is real.

Plum Island and the whole animal disease control program exist to protect the nation's food supply and thereby protect the nation's well being. This, like the contribution that each of you make to the improvement of animal health and the control of animal disease, is truly one of the scientific marvels which make the America we know possible.

It is important to have more Americans understand the significance of your work and ours. We have seen too many things taken for granted today become tomorrow's crisis. USDA does not and will not take animal health for granted. You have always helped with this work. The Department of Agriculture is counting on your continued support.