



Means to an End

Michigan partnerships promote healthier cattle.

by **BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON**

While health requirements at Michigan's bull test station may not be necessarily unique, the partnerships fostered to keep those requirements tough and contemporary may be. Interested parties in Michigan have found that by working proactively together on health and other crucial quality issues, they can reduce problems with bulls, add more value to their sales and prompt producers in the state to improve their own operation protocols.

"We have 30-plus operations that commingle cattle at the station, and that requires a rigid health protocol," says Monte Bordner, Angus representative and chair for the Michigan Cattlemen's Association/Michigan State University (MCA/MSU) Bull Test from Sturgis, Mich. "It has become second nature. All of us work together to bring the health requirements up, and that raises the bar for everyone. We believe the health requirements add value to the bulls

we sell. It is a little like offering a warranty on a car."

A primary objective of the station is to help producers obtain superior performance-tested bulls that have been evaluated for growth and have passed a reproductive physical examination. Michigan required having bulls come to the station with an RFID tag in their left ear before RFID became mandatory in the state. The committee also implemented ultrasound evaluation when it first became available. Health requirements established by the MCA/MSU Bull Test Committee exceed regulatory requirements of the state, and are mandatory for all bulls prior to arrival at the bull test station.

Bulls must have an initial vaccination and booster for such diseases as infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD), parainfluenza-3, (PI₃), *Haemophilus somnus*, leptospira (five strains), clostridia (seven-way) and bovine respiratory syncytial virus (BRSV). IBR and PI₃ vaccines must be modified-live-virus (MLV) vaccines. All bulls must be ear-notched and test negative for BVD persistent infection (BVD-PI) prior to delivery to the station, and must have a negative tuberculosis (TB) test within 60 days of delivery, except for bulls from TB accredited-free herds. Only bulls originating from outside of Michigan are required to have a brucellosis test.

"Michigan is a very forward-thinking state with its strong vaccine program. That has helped make sure we do not have any major disease outbreaks," says David Hawkins, 21-year coordinator for the bull test, and retired MSU educator. "We want an excellent bull sale each year, and that requires us to pay close attention to health requirements."

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Battling BVD

A three-year, groundbreaking effort to eradicate bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) from Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP) is another example of Michigan's effort to bring producers, experts and others together to address health concerns. Ben Bartlett, Michigan State University (MSU) Extension educator, and Dan Grooms, MSU Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences, are working with producers and Pfizer Animal Health to identify BVD-infected animals.

"We have about 100 dairy farms and 600 beef operations in the UP, and 180 herds signed up so far in the study," Bartlett says. "We have identified four herds with eight positive animals; two are beef herds with 2008-born calves that tested positive. The goal is to identify and eliminate all animals with BVD-PI (persistent infection)."

BVD has become the most costly viral disease in U.S. cattle herds, costing an estimated \$2 billion per year. Bartlett notes that because BVD can infect an unborn fetus before it has developed an immune system, the calf is sometimes born persistently infected with the BVD virus. While not all PI calves survive,

some are born looking normal but shed large amounts of BVD virus in their secretions all their lives. Bartlett says these PI animals serve as a BVD disease reservoir, which makes controlling the disease difficult.

"We've talked one-on-one with producers at meetings across the UP to get general information and to create a testing program to cover all cattle on each farm. Each producer collects ear notches, which are submitted to the MSU diagnostic laboratory," he says. "This is the first time an entire geographical region will try to eliminate all BVD-PI cattle. The Upper Peninsula is ideally suited because it is an isolated geographic region. There are a variety of herds, and most cattle move out of the UP, not in."

Bartlett hopes the BVD-PI eradication project will generate an increase in general herd health in herds where PI cattle are found, as well as assurance that a herd that tests negative is BVD-PI-free. Ultimately, he says, the tested negative status of UP herds could add value to those animals when sold as feeder cattle or replacements.

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Part of that forward thinking for the 2009 sale in March included discussions about how to handle arthrogryposis multiplex (AM). The committee met in early January to weigh bulls and discuss with consignors the availability of a definitive AM test. With assistance from the American Angus Association, hair samples from 24 Angus bulls were submitted for AM testing based on their pedigrees. Seven Simmental bulls were also tested.

“Of the 31 bulls, we identified three known carriers and those bulls did not sell,” says Hawkins. “We did not have an AM requirement this year, but we could for 2010.”

While Bordner sees the AM information as useful and necessary, it has affected his operation. “We used a carrier bull last

year. We took a big hit. I have several replacement heifers in the feedlot as a result,” he says. “But if you have animals that are AM carriers, you shouldn’t sell them into breeding channels. The Michigan Angus Association is doing the same AM testing for the Michigan Beef Expo.”

Leadership roles

Stringent health regulations at state sales also improve standards on Bordner’s and other consignors’ farms.

“We focus more on our health protocol,” he says. “Every calf has two live vaccines for BVD, and our heifers get a third shot. We are more cognizant of biosecurity issues, and more cautious about where we rent pasture. It’s all about good management. Producers have to step forward and take a leadership

role to succeed.”

Bordner anticipates the Michigan test station will consider additional changes to health requirements in the future. For example, Johne’s disease testing of consigned bulls is possible, and he expects the committee to look at other genetic defects before next year’s sale.

“Our commercial buyers want and expect a quality product. Our sale prices have risen each year for the last 10 years, and I think that is due to our tradition of presenting top-quality bulls,” Hawkins says. “Perhaps the biggest testimonial is that the bulls sold stay here in Michigan herds. About two-thirds of our buyers are repeat buyers. We can attribute that to offering sound bulls that meet health and other requirements.”

