

Agriculture Committee October 4, 2019

HALLORAN: Good. Good morning, everybody, and welcome. We're a little bit early but I don't think anyone has objections to being early for a change. This is a briefing, not a hearing. It's a briefing from the Department of Agriculture. We have a familiar face and Amelia Breinig is here to give us-- give us some information about the livestock disease and animal health infrastructure response system. And I think it's important for the committee to have this update and the public at large. We have LB344 in the wings which is a major rewrite. And so this should be productive information for-- for all of us for that purpose at least. So with that, I would ask you to silence your phones. I'm not going to introduce everyone here. I think they're all familiar faces to you. But if you don't silence your phone, please answer it put it on speaker so we can carry on the conversation. I'm just kidding. All right. Welcome.

AMELIA BREINIG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the chairman said, my name is Amelia Breinig, and I am the deputy director for Nebraska's Department of Agriculture. I had to remind myself that today is in fact October and that session hasn't started. Thank God. But it is lovely to see all of you nonetheless Director Wellman sends his regards from the United Kingdom this morning. He is participating on a United Kingdom government-sponsored trade mission over there right now

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and so he wishes, of course, he could be with all of you this morning.

But you have me instead. So as the Chairman laid out for you, I am--

I'm happy to be here today to talk a little bit about our animal-- our animal health protection portion of the Department of Agriculture.

Obviously with agriculture being the number one industry for the state of Nebraska and with animal health and livestock being a big portion of that number one industry, we feel that it is of the utmost import importance to have a good system in place, to have good staffing in place, and have the logistical support in order to have that and to carry out our duties. So I will walk through our system that we have over at the department. Much of this-- this information I do want to lay out there. You can find it on our Web site. We try to be as transparent as possible when sharing information. But, of course, if you need some more clarity on information or if there's any other questions that I can answer, I'm happy to try to do that at the end or follow up with you after this hearing as appropriate. So starting off first and foremost with our staff as it pertains to animal health, we have one state veterinarian; we have an assistant state veterinarian; and then we have a state epidemiologist. All three of those individuals are housed here in Lincoln on the fourth floor of the State Office Building with the rest of the department. As a whole for our animal health and plant health administration, we have one administrator that administers those programs together as part of that hierarchy, as well located here in Lincoln at the State Office

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Building and then we have essentially a plant side that runs down and an animal health side. On that animal health side, we then split the state up into five different areas. There's a map again that you can find on-line that just chunks it up in five different spots. Each of those five regions has a field veterinary office and there are five livestock inspectors located in each of those five areas throughout the state. We do have as a part of our animal health department our dog and cat program is a part of that. And so with that we have three dog and cat inspectors that are also on staff. We have an emergency management coordinator that lays between our department and NEMA, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency. Of course, she works on various issues what-- what have you, what comes to play. The disaster of April and this spring comes to mind I think to a lot of us. But a lot of times those will involve animal health issues and so she will be in on that. But, of course, any other disaster not pertaining in animal health she will also help liaison and work with us to make sure that we're going through the appropriate protocol within that. And then we have three program managers as well on staff. And also four office staff assistants which, I think we can all agree, the staff assistants are those that really oftentimes make the offices run. We're very grateful for all of their hard work. In terms of statistics for livestock in the state of Nebraska, we have 6.8 million cattle in the state of Nebraska. There are 3.75 million pigs throughout the state of Nebraska. There's 79,000 sheep and goats in our state. We have 7,300

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poultry farm premises that house 9.2 million birds. And then we have 130 dairy farms throughout the state with around 59,000 cows in spread throughout those respective dairy farms. When it comes to surveillance and testing, obviously with the state of Nebraska being right smack dab in the middle of the country, we are a heavily reliant-- we are heavily reliant, of course, on imports and exports. Livestock being transferred through, across throughout the state and as well as across state lines. We have 161 diseases that are required to be reported as well as then monitored if we were to find them or if they were to be suspected within the state. I'll run through a few of them, some of which you will be well aware of and have heard of, some of which may surprise you or you may not be well aware of. African swine fever, which I will go through and touch on a bit more later and preparations that we've been doing at the department to help combat that from-- from entering into Nebraska as best we can. Anthrax, avian influenza, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, brucellosis, contagious equine metritis, chronic wasting disease, equine infectious anemia, foot-and-mouth disease, rabies, scrapie, Seneca Valley virus, tuberculosis, vesicular stomatitis, and West Nile virus and those are just naming a few. In terms of these information traces when I talk about surveillance and tracing, our field staff are required to follow up or flag any of the imports that we we find specific violations of and those could be considered any that are coming from states where we know there's a known disease outbreak or there's something that we

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need to be concerned about. When CVIs, which are certificates of veterinarian inspection, if those have inaccurate information or if we-- we have a flag raised that something might not quite be right, if there's a head count number off within specific loads-- again each load is supposed to say exactly destination from point A to point B, what it's carrying, things of that nature-- if something's off; if there's identification that's not accurate or that looks to be not accurate; if the disease testing that needed to be completed is not completed prior to being shipped, some requirements vary depending again upon where they're coming from, where they're going to. And then, of course, if there are quarantines that are issued at the time of import. For example, currently, you know, any importation of cattle coming from Mexico they have tuberculosis and so there is an automatic quarantine that needs to be put in place at that time. In terms of how we carry out our education and our outreach to, one, let folks know about these different diseases and then, two, let folks know what we do at the department to help either eradicate them, protect against them, what have you. We work very diligently through trainings, through certain symposiums, conventions, things that we will go to and have conversations with the relative folks to educate producers, veterinarians, and industry groups of all the diseases as well as keeping lines of communications open of things that we're hearing, things folks in the industry are hearing. Obviously, our industry partners are those that are on the ground every single day when we

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might not be so we try very hard to keep those lines of communication open. We at the department feel very strongly about the importance of educating on biosecurity measures and bioterrorism measures.

Obviously, again, with a state like ours so reliant on agriculture it's of the utmost importance to make sure that everyone has a good understanding of why bio-- what biosecurity is and why it's extremely important. And then also to help ensure and we take great pride in this in making sure that our certificates of veterinary inspection, like I mentioned earlier, we review more than 54,000 of those annually. But to make sure that those are correct, that they are done in the correct manner is obviously also very important to us. In terms of the licensing and certifications that we at the department issue, distribute, award, we are required to assure that all of the following entities-- and I'll list him off-- are annually credentialed or licensed and inspected and those include veterinarians, our livestock auction markets, our renders, our pet food manufacturers, our buying stations, our livestock dealers, our poultry improvement participants, as well as commercial dog and cat facilities, and livestock feed mills. In terms of emergency response, I mentioned earlier that we do have a emergency response coordinator on staff that liaises between the department and NEMA, all of our staff pertaining to animal health they're required to be trained with the incident command system as a part of NEMA and FEMA as it were. And then we have several staff that participate with NEMA and then and oftentimes USDA, FDA, whatever your

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relevant federal agency is in trainings. Great example of this was this past week we held a four-day training in accordance with USDA on African swine fever. And that was in accordance with federal personnel, state personnel, as well as industry stakeholders. I did not have an opportunity to sit in this training from beginning to end, but myself and Director Wellman were able to pop in and out and it truly was interesting to see not only the cooperation between state and federal but then the cooperation and the reliance that we were able to have with our stakeholders here in the state and their cooperation. It was much appreciated. We also have in terms of some tools at our disposal. We have emergency response trailers that we maintain for quick access. They're basically outfitted with veterinarian supplies. Those are spread out throughout the states or throughout the state, excuse me, in those-- those five areas that I've described earlier that the state is divided into. We also have what's called our livestock emergency disease response system also known as the LEDRS. I'll touch on that a little bit more later. And then we do a practicing veterinarian call twice a month to assess any issues, make sure that everyone is on the same page with what's going on or-- or what potential issues we might have down the road. In terms of defining some-- some definitions, when I received the letter from Chairman Halloran, when Director Wellman received a letter, there was a portion there asking for some clarification on just some differences in categories and when different diseases are designated certain ways

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over others. As defined by USDA, a foreign animal disease also known as FDE-- FAD, excuse me, is an important transmissible livestock or poultry disease believed to be absent from the United States and its territories that has the potential significant health or economic impact. These diseases are also defined as a transboundary disease and it's generally a pest or a disease that's not known to exist in the United States' animal population. The difference between that and an emerging infectious disease is that an emerging infectious animal disease is an infectious disease that is newly appeared in a population or that has been known for some time but is rapidly increasing in incidence or geographic range. These emerging diseases are monitored very closely and a good example of this would be West Nile, something that just comes on relatively quickly. And then finally a zoonotic disease which is different yet is defined as diseases that are those of great concerns and they are caused by infections that are spread between animals and people. In terms of defining kind of your disease-free definition, these are different classifications that they're applied most to import and export situations and they indicate basically if animals are free to move between states where they're not free to be moved to specific areas and they are based on classification. The class or stage is indicative of the disease outbreak of concern and the level of that concern and a free status is indicative of a completely clean bill of health and something can be transported wherever it can go. Different classes

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range from Class A which means that you have less than .25 percent of your herd that's infected or is class free. Stage 1, 2, or free you're modified accredited, you're modified free; you're modified accredited advance; and then the stages go on down from there. A state that has APHIS is determined and conducts these active state tests to make sure that we're up to date on where our respective stages are. Circling back real quick to LEDRS, which again was the acronym for the livestock emergency disease response system, this is a system that we run within the Department of Agriculture began back in 2002 and the purpose was to help NDA and the state of Nebraska maintain good biosecurity and help combat against bioterrorism essentially. So there's a veterinary corps of leaders, members that is practicing veterinarians. They are Extension educators. They're county emergency coordinators. And they are placed throughout the state to help us aid in surveillance and emergency response efforts. We have an annual conference with our LEDRS veterinarian corps once a year to get brushed up on trainings, pass information. It's usually a day and a half conference held somewhere in the central part of the state. In terms of disease response, I thought it might be helpful today to talk through, give a couple examples of what happens when we might contract something here in the state, and then what are the respective steps that we then go through in order to combat that and then try to eradicate it, if possible, from the state. So I'll start with African swine fever simply because you cannot eradicate it. Once you get this

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disease, it's very difficult to get rid of. We luckily right now do not have it on the North American continent, but it is running rampant in southeast Asia as well as parts of the European Union. I like to think that we have good partners in our bordering neighbors to the north and south and that the Canadian government has a partnership with USDA as well as the Mexican government. All three of them have kind of a tri-nation partnership to help combat and keep African swine fever out of the North American continent and hopeful that they'll stay successful in that effort. But as I mentioned, we partner quite often with USDA to work through trainings and to work through different exercises to what we would do and what would need to be done if African swine fever ever made its way to the United States and by suit, Nebraska. So first off, African swine fever is a reportable disease. So if it were found or to be reported here in the state, you would-- the person, farmer, owner, what have you-- would need to immediately notify animal health authorities. So for us it's the state animal health official which is our state veterinarian, Dr. Hughes, and the USDA assistant director. From there we would quickly go into action to isolate or quarantine the animals until there is a defective [SIC] diagnosis. As you can well imagine, things like this would be tested and retested to make doubly sure that it is what we think it is; and samples can only be sent to specific laboratories. Not every laboratory in the United States has the ability to test for this and so samples would then be sent. Then given that it is attested

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positive, as I mentioned, unfortunately with African swine fever there is no way to eradicate it. And so then you begin your depopulation process of your herd. And then in this moment in time as well you would also start putting in a quarantine probably with your area. Again depending upon the affected area, that would then say what the stipulations or the distances of whatever your quarantine area might be. And then at that point, you'd investigate, hope that you were able to pinpoint exactly where it came from, where it started so that you can then stop it from there. That's a quick example of something that we hope never happens and I went through that relatively quickly. As you can imagine, there's a lot of simultaneous actions that-- that occur during this process as you have to move and react relatively quickly. But I thought you would be fine with me giving you the abridged version. In terms of a situation that we've had in the past in 2015 when we had the avian influenza outbreak here in the state, it did hit a very similar process to what I outlined with what would happen with African swine fever. It is a reportable disease. So it was reported. The animal health official authorities here were-- were-- were notified. There was a quarantine of the affected farms at that time. It was 10 kilometers. That's what the surveillance zone was. All flocks within the zone needed to be tested, monitored, and that-- identified first, tested, and then monitored. Then the depopulation occurred, the disinfection occurred, a repopulation that occurred, and then we were successful at that time in 2015 of keeping it isolated in

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a specific area which is something that if, you know, a disease comes here is something that we hope to do is at least keep it isolated in one spot. With that, I went through all that relatively quickly. But I would be remiss if I didn't put a quick plug in for LB344, as the Chairman brought up. It-- LB344 is the animal health bill that we brought before the committee, we being the Department of Ag, and Chairman Halloran last year. We-- we look to bring it again this year. We are in the process right now of making changes. In August there was a roundtable, I guess you could call it, held. The chairman was there as well as Vice Chair Brandt as well as interested stakeholders. I think we had good discussion. I think we at the department learned a lot of areas in which the bill could be improved upon and we're enjoying that process right now of doing so. And I look forward to continuing to work with the committee to get that bill through committee and ultimately passed on the floor. You know, when we talk about the importance of a bill like LB344, it's-- it's I think a lot simpler other than the facts of, you know, does it streamline things. Does it make things more efficient for the department? Does it harmonize our rules and regs with the USDA? Is the answer to all those things are true. But I think what this bill also does is it's a-- I see it as a commitment to one of our largest industries in the state to say that animal health in this state is important and that we want to do what we can to put the tools in place to make sure that it stays

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that way. So with that, I'm more than happy to try to answer any of your questions as best I can.

HALLORAN: Any questions? I'm assuming that a lot of-- a lot of the protocol that you speak to at the department has-- is-- is driven by federal protocol so that there is harmonization between the states.

AMELIA BREINIG: I would say a fair amount of that is definitely true. For example, when we talk about, you know, African swine fever, a lot of what our preparation goes as goes your federal preparation. So I would say that's accurate. Yes.

HALLORAN: It was not a question as much as a comment, but I don't want to assume things when I get in trouble for assuming things. But-- but it seems like if we don't have that kind of harmonization between the adjoining states or all the states for that matter then all the states are at risk of not handling it properly. Yes, Senator Brandt.

BRANDT: Thank you, Chairman Halloran. I'd just like to reinforce what you're saying about African swine fever. On the radio yesterday, China has lost 55 percent of its hogs. That's more than every hog in the United States. It's now in Vietnam. It's a highly [INAUDIBLE] disease. And so what we're talking about is animal disease, but we're talking about food safety. So I really appreciate the fact that we're in training here for when this does happen. I know there's a lot of differences between the infrastructure of the hog industry in China

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versus the United States. We have a lot of advantages here. But, yeah, anything-- anything [INAUDIBLE] support so.

HALLORAN: Any other questions from the committee or comments? I think he must have been very complete.

AMELIA BREINIG: First time ever. Thank you all very much.

HALLORAN: Thank you.

LATHROP: Thank you.

HALLORAN: Appreciate it. All right. That's it for the presentation from the Department of Agriculture. You're all dismissed. I know you all have appointments.