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STAR BULLETIN A-1

Molokai Cattle Slaughter Only Way to Eradicate Bovine TB, Officials Say

First of Two Parts

By Stephanie Castillo
Star-Bulletin Writer

All of the estimated 9,000 cattle on Molokai are being slaughtered, an attempt by the government to rid the Island of bovine tuberculosis.

For a year after the slaughter, no cattle will be allowed there.

The disease is chronic and has plagued cattle ranchers there for years. But some have been unwilling to accept what appears to be a drastic remedy. A few say they will sue the government to stop the killing; none has so far.

The "depopulation" program, as the government calls it, has raised questions about why it must be done and whether it will be effective in ridding Molokai of bovine TB.

Why must all of the cattle — and not just infected herds — be eliminated when less than 2 percent are said to be diseased? And is the meat that will go to market safe to consume?

Bovine tuberculois is not an immediate threat to human life, officials say. Strict federal inspection at slaughterhouses keeps unsafe meat off the market.

BUT THE disease is a threat to Hawaii's cattle industry — a threat that is made even more serious by the nation's depressed beef market, which has been called the worst in history, officials say.

Had the Sept. 10 order to eliminate all of Molokai's cattle not been given, Hawaii's legacy would have been a stigmatized cattle industry and the loss of its "modified accredited-free TB status," said Dr. Gary Chun, federal veterinarian. That status indicates to the federal government that a state has had cases of bovine TB within the last five years, but has taken adequate measures to control the disease, he said.

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With the loss of that status, all cattle in Hawaii — not just animals on Molokai — would have to be tested for TB. And the sale, exchange and breeding of Hawaii's cattle would have been severely restricted, Chun said.

He said that the message to the rest of nation would have been that Hawaii was incapable of controlling a disease that most of the country has already whipped.

FOR DECADES, the federal government has been waging this kind of war on bovine TB, a disease so insidious that the government is convinced its most effective weapon is the killing of whole herds.

Although almost all states have been certified as TB free, five — including Hawaii — have continued to turn up cases of infected herds every year. (The other states are North Carolina, Texas, Louisiana and New Mexico.)

Bovine TB has not affected cattle on the other Islands in recent years. The last non-Molokai cattle to be affected were in Hana, Maui, but that was cleared up in 1983.

However, state and federal veterinarians felt strongly that the incidence of disease on Molokai was jeopardizing the whole state, even though that incidence was in less than 2 percent of the cattle tested and examined.

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Molokai Cattle Slaughter Called Only Way to Wipe Out TB

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Unsuccessful and costly efforts — mainly herd testing and depopulation — to rid the Island of the disease that has plagued Molokai for more than 40 years was enough for the government to decide that drastic action was needed.

"WE KNOW THAT it looked like it was getting better there," said Dr. John Atwell, head of the U.S. Agriculture Department's veterinary services in Washington, D.C.

"But we're not engaged in trying to keep TB at a level you can live with. We're engaged in a program that says we're going to get rid of TB so that we don't have it, period," said Atwell.

"The situation on Molokai leaves itself to taking the most drastic action possible," he said.

Dr. Charles Campbell, a federal veterinarian who has been servicing the Neighbor Islands for more than 20 years, explained that he had watched the situation on Molokai get better over the years. but it never cleared up completely.

"We brought the incidence down by constantly testing," Campbell said. But while the situation did improve, "we got to the point that we couldn't make it any better," he said.

AND THERE was "always the chance of it spreading again and blowing up into another island-wide infection" where now it has been confined to the east side, Campbell said.

"There's so much interchange of animals going on — ranchers trucking animals to breed back and forth — that as far as I'm concerned, it's one big herd there," he said.

TB-infected animals, including feral cattle and swine, had only been found on the east end of Molokai. Just last April, a herd of five cattle in the area was slaughtered because they were diseased.

Two years ago, a herd with 60 head was eliminated. And in 1980, 450 head, then newly purchased by Molokai Ranch, were killed when infected cattle was found among them.

Breeding quarantines and testing programs of other herds on the east side continued up until the September order to kill all of the cattle.

ON THE WEST side — where the Island's largest herd belonging to Molokai Ranch grazes on some 50,000 acres — there's little

No TB lesions were found in the carcasses of the so-called reactor cattle, but TB bacilli were cultured and grown from a few of them.

Continuous reactions from cattle on the west side and the continued outbreaks on the east side led both state and federal veterinarians to conclude that the whole Island was exposed to bovine TB in one way or another.

"We have a situation where there have been feral cattle and feral swine with the TB, where there's been a history of depopulating herds. It's not long after we depopulate that we find another herd (with TB), even though we can't find direct contact (with an infected herd). This tells us that there's a lot more exposure of TB than we're getting our hands on," said the USDA's Atwell.

"As far as I know, it's the kind of situation that does not exist anywhere in the United States," he said.

TO CONSIDER all Molokai cattle to have been exposed to bovine TB is something that many of the Island's cattle ranchers cannot accept.

Atwell's response is: "If you had a cow and could show that this cow has never been out of pen, never been bred, never had her out with the neighbor's cows or tied her out in the pasture with other animals — I think that's the only kind of case you could make.

"I feel what we are doing can be justified epidemiologically," he said, saying the source of infection has been Molokai's uncontrolled herds, common pasturing of herds, infected feral cattle and swine, and the interchanging of herds.

But most significantly, Atwell's reasoning stems from the fact that exposed cattle can harbor the TB bacilli for many years without showing any indication of infection.

"For us to go in and take only the big herd and any herd we say we know have had direct exposure, would not assure us that we're going to get TB off the Island," said Atwell.

"Our only justification for spending those millions of dollars (ranchers can get up to $450 per slaughtered animal from the government) is to eradicate totally so that when the cattle are repopulated, we don't have any TB on Molokai," he said.

DR. WILLIAM Johnson, Atwell's assistant, said: "We have found throughout history that the herds will eventually get to where they're no longer getting reactions to the tests. But then come back a year or two later and you will have animals with lesions and you will find that the animals have been carrying the organism in a very chronic state.

"Through our experience with TB in herds throughout the country, it has been determined that we have real difficulty eradicating TB from the herds unless we eventually depopulate them," said Johnson.

But what are the chances of the TB infection reoccurring on the Island, say through exposed wildlife that continue to live on the Island even as the depopulation program goes on?

With feral cattle already having been removed, and with the problem sure to clear up in feral swine once any and all diseased cattle are removed, "I feel there's no chance," said Campbell.

"Nothing is guaranteed, but our hope is there won't be any problem from it. With the Island vacant of cattle for a year and the continued epidemiological testing of wildlife being done . . . the chances are nil," he said.

THREE WILDLIFE disease studies have been done on Molokai since 1980, and these indicate that the spread of the bovine TB from wildlife is no longer a factor, government officials say. Some disagree. (See accompanying story.)

With the massive slaughtering of cattle comes a flood of meat into Hawaii's markets, meat that some segments of the community now say they are afraid to eat.

Although there have been no cases of lesioned cattle so far in the more than 300 head slaughtered, and despite reassurances from state and federal government officials that the meat is safe and wholesome, the beef has been stigmatized.

For example, several state Board of Education members at a meeting Nov. 8 expressed concern about including Molokai beef in school lunches.

Health concerns about eating Molokai beef — all of which is strictly and carefully inspected at federally certified slaughterhouses — are unfounded, officials said.

ONLY BEEF declared free of disease is allowed to be marketed to the consumer, they said.

Besides, they said, state records show there have been no cases of humans contracting bovine TB.

If lesioned cattle are found at slaughter, the meat cannot be marketed, but must be disposed of according to federal guidelines, they said.

While all of this may explain the reasons behind the depopulation program, a few questions still remain.

Among them are how the decision to depopulate all the cattle came about? Is it an effort to bail out the financially ailing Molokai Ranch, as it has been suggested by some other ranchers on the Island? If not, why was the program implemented without advance warning to the ranchers?

Tomorrow: No conspiracy.