

County fair season is underway as exhibitors keep an eye on their animals

Human diseases prompt biosecurity measures at fairs

July 8, 2009... With gates opening this week in Marion and Curry counties, Oregon’s county fair season has arrived, and with it comes the normal biosecurity protocol designed to keep animals healthy. But this year, in a twist from the norm, there may be more concern about livestock catching a disease from people, rather than from other animals. The recent outbreak of swine flu throughout the world, including cases in Oregon, has shifted a bit of this year’s biosecurity emphasis at fairs and livestock shows, culminating with the Oregon State Fair later this summer.

“We have been looking at a potential scenario of H1N1 influenza that has affected humans,” says Dr. Don Hansen, state veterinarian with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. “Currently, the pathogen does not appear to be in any swine herds in the US. We’ve been talking to swine exhibitors— primarily 4-H and FFA groups— as well as fair managers. We are cautioning them to do something seemingly unusual this year, and that is protect the pigs from people infected with the flu who may be at the fair.”

The general public may think the current swine flu outbreak— caused by what is officially called the Novel Influenza A (H1N1) virus— was the result of infected pigs spreading the disease to humans. In fact, one hog farm in Canada reported swine that had contracted the disease. But it was later discovered that the pigs became infected from human carriers.

“We are recommending that visitors be kept at a reasonable distance from pigs at the fair to avoid close contact,” says Hansen. “That will help protect the pigs.”

Keeping the distance between spectators and pigs to at least six feet, if possible, is recommended along with providing an adequate number of hand washing stations stocked with disinfectant.

General biosecurity practices are aimed at prevention and focus this year on human health first. Exhibitors and other animal caretakers with flu-like symptoms should not be around swine for at least seven days from the beginning of symptoms, or until a physician has ruled out influenza as a diagnosis.

“We encourage exhibitors to pay close attention to themselves, their families, and their close associates,” says Hansen. “If they are experiencing flu-like symptoms, they shouldn’t get near pigs.”

Monitoring swine health is also important. Pigs should be observed daily for signs of disease. Flu-like symptoms in pigs include heavy breathing, open mouth breathing, or severe coughing combined with a loss of appetite.

“We are telling exhibitors and others to keep an eye on the animal before, during, and after the fair,” says Hansen. “Any pig exhibiting signs of respiratory disease should be reported. The on-site veterinarian should take precautions to isolate any animal exhibiting disease.”

---more---

Veterinarians are also being told to notify ODA's Hansen of any pig showing clinical signs of potential influenza and to collect samples as directed by state animal health officials.

Fair managers and show organizers are encouraged to maintain good barn hygiene and ventilation. They are also directed to keep swine exhibitor contact information for ODA inspection for at least 30 days, in case there is the need for a trace back due to a swine flu outbreak.

Swine flu may be the disease du jour, but several other animal diseases— many that also affect humans— are worthy of attention during the fair season. In the past couple of years, special efforts have been made at Oregon county fairs to protect livestock against avian influenza and exotic newcastle disease in poultry, vesicular stomatitis in horses and cattle, a viral hemorrhagic disease in rabbits, and *E. coli O157*, an animal-to-human disease issue which caused dozens of illnesses at the Lane County Fair in 2002.

Last year, a disease called malignant catarrhal fever showed up at the Puyallup Fair in Washington.

"The virus was transmitted across barn space from young sheep to cattle," says Hansen. "The sheep are simply carriers, but cattle are uniquely susceptible to the disease and many of them died. We hope this was an isolated incident, but we remind everyone to practice basic biosecurity while handling animals. In this case, we encourage sheep exhibitors to avoid going from handling sheep to handling cattle. We recommend changing clothes, disinfecting boots, and washing hands after working with sheep and before going to work with cattle."

No matter what the disease, biosecurity doesn't end when the fair is over. Livestock owners need to continue precautions as they bring their animals back home.

"They should assume the animal has been exposed to some infectious agent while it was at the fair and could be incubating a disease," says Hansen. "The animal should be properly isolated from other animals back home for a range of 10 to 20 days."

ODA's routine requirements help keep a lid on importing unwanted animal diseases. A certificate of veterinary inspection and an Oregon import permit are mandatory for all animals coming from other states. Fair managers can and should double check the paperwork to ensure the animal is legally cleared to be in Oregon.

All animals entering the fair are also routinely checked by on-site veterinarians. Fair managers are asked to support the vet's observations and decisions when it comes to the treatment and reporting of sick animals.

The public plays an important role in animal health. For fair goers, signs will be posted encouraging people to wash their hands after interacting with animals, especially if they are going to consume food. Young children should be discouraged from eating in livestock areas. Of course, sick people should simply stay away.

Despite the annual concerns over animal and human health, Oregonians should feel free to embrace the cultural experience of the county fair, including the livestock exhibits. Making sure both people and animals are healthy before and during the event will ensure they are healthy afterwards.

For more information, contact Dr. Don Hansen, State Veterinarian, at (503) 986-4680.