

Change promised after foot-and-mouth scare

TOPEKA (AP) — The state livestock commissioner is promising legislators that last week's unfounded rumor of a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak will change how information is disseminated.

George Teagarden told the House Agriculture Committee on Monday that his agency, the Animal Health Department, lacked an adequate plan for dealing with such rumors.

"In hindsight, it's pretty easy to sit back and see things you should do," he said.

Teagarden was to face another round of questions Tuesday from the Senate Agriculture Committee.

He told the House committee that his agency has learned the importance of managing and sharing information with essential personnel before a crisis develops.

On March 12, a rumor that nine cows

at the Holton Livestock Market were infected with foot-and-mouth disease spread quickly throughout the Midwest and to the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

"We did not dream that information would get out when there was no need for it to get out," Teagarden said.

Kansas had 12 suspected cases of foot-and-mouth disease last year — all on ranches and all negative — but this was the first incident at market, he said.

Analysts estimate that the rumor cost the industry as much as \$50 million nationwide after prices dropped \$1.50 per hundred weight for market cattle. Prices have rebounded slightly.

Teagarden said state, congressional and market regulators are investigating whether anyone illegally manipulated the market for profit.

In retrospect, Teagarden said, he should have issued a statement to allay

public fears, possibly to the effect that tests for various suspected diseases are not uncommon and that results from the U.S. Department of Agriculture would be announced later.

He noted that the USDA had asked state officials not to comment until tests were done because of the potential worldwide impact on markets.

The cattle at the center of the rumor had sores in their mouths.

State investigators found the source of the mouth irritation — coarse hay — and discovered a horse with similar symptoms.

That was important because horses cannot contract foot-and-mouth disease, Teagarden said.

Tests analyzed by the USDA lab in Plum Island, N.Y., confirmed the Animal Health Department's initial diagnosis.

Teagarden said his agency already

has revised its procedures for responding to a suspected case of foreign animal disease.

In any such cases in the future, he added, the Kansas Division of Emergency Management will be notified earlier than it was this time.

Maj. Gen. Greg Gardner, state adjutant general and emergency management director, told the House committee he ordered a review of the state's response to the rumor.

Gardner said he had learned of the incident the following day, but not from Teagarden's agency. He also was contacted by Iowa officials who heard the rumor and were close to activating their emergency plans.

Teagarden, who had been attending a meeting in Reno, Nev., at the time, said the cattle were isolated as much as possible at the market. He said he remained in constant contact with his

staff. Rep. Dan Johnson, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee Chairman, said he was confident all along that the rumor was false, based on reports that the cattle did not show other signs of foot-and-mouth.

However, "I had some telephone calls that were close to panic," he added.

Johnson, R-Hays, said the incident gives more reason to build a new research lab at Kansas State University. Such a facility would be able to test for highly contagious diseases and get results immediately.

Teagarden said field tests are being developed to make initial diagnosis of disease. However, those tests will still require independent USDA confirmation.

His answers did not satisfy all House committee members.

Rep. Sharon Schwartz, R-Washington, was concerned that only the Kansas Livestock Association was immediately informed the tests for foot-and-mouth were negative.

She said it would be helpful to bring producers "in the loop" so that they can curtail operations until the situation is resolved.

Teagarden said that the Kansas Livestock Association and Kansas Farm Bureau were part of his media team and would be involved with helping spread information.

In other action: — A House committee endorsed a "no-call" telemarketing bill backed by the industry.

— The state's livestock commissioner told legislators that last week's unfounded rumor of a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak will change how information is disseminated.

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