USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

AUG 0 7 2009

The Honorable Todd Staples
Commissioner
Texas Department of Agriculture
Post Office Box 12847
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Commissioner Staples:

Thank you for your letter of July 9, 2009, to the Department of Agriculture (USDA). We appreciate your concerns regarding depopulation of the bovine tuberculosis (TB)-affected dairy herd in Texas.

USDA takes very seriously its responsibility to protect the health of U.S. livestock in a manner that is responsive, timely, and cost effective. Although funding is one of the issues affecting the current situation in Texas, it is not the only factor. USDA is reevaluating the efficacy of whole-herd depopulation as a strategy. The majority of animals in a bovine TB-affected herd are unlikely to be infected; they can be safely maintained and eventually moved in commerce after a strict testing regimen. The persistence of bovine TB in the United States is another key reason for choosing not to depopulate this dairy herd. We now believe that USDA should depopulate entire herds only when doing so could quickly eradicate an emerging disease and be cost-beneficial. We continue to detect bovine TB in herds in other parts of the United States; therefore, depopulating this dairy herd would not lead to eradication of the disease in the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, whole-herd depopulation with indemnity is costly to the Federal Government and wastes healthy livestock. Given the need to restrain Federal deficits, USDA has determined that a test-and-remove plan is the appropriate response to ensure that bovine TB does not spread from this herd. This test-and-remove approach to affected herd management has been applied to herds in the past and is currently in use for other bovine TB-affected dairy herds in other States. We believe that such a plan can successfully manage this particular dairy herd by preventing the spread of the disease, eventually permitting the herd to move to market or otherwise maintain its economic viability. However, in order to protect American agriculture, herds in which bovine TB infection has been confirmed must remain under quarantine until all requirements of an individual herd plan have been completed.

We appreciate your commitment to the health of the Nation's agriculture, and we assure you of our continued dedication to combating bovine TB while balancing the needs of producers..

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary