

CONCERNS ABOUT BRUCELLOSIS IN MONTANA

This past spring, brucellosis was confirmed in cattle on a Paradise Valley ranch. It was very bad news for Montana's livestock industry. Montana had been certified as brucellosis-free since 1985. But as a result of the disease occurring in two separate herds within 12 months—another outbreak occurred in a herd near Bridger in 2007—the U.S. Department of Agriculture is revoking Montana's brucellosis-free status. That will reduce the marketability of Montana cattle and require costly testing by ranchers.

Over the past 20 years, most of the concern about brucellosis has centered on Yellowstone National Park. Each winter hundreds of bison, a substantial percentage of which carries the disease, leave the park and represent potential transmission risk if they come near cattle grazing in adjacent national forests and on private lands. A much smaller percentage of elk also carries brucellosis. In July, the National Veterinary Services laboratory in Ames, Iowa, determined that the Paradise Valley infection likely came from elk, though scientists could not confirm the source. Four cattle herds in Wyoming that tested positive in 2004 were likely infected by elk crowded into winter feeding areas.

Some have said that because ranchers worked so hard to eliminate the disease in livestock, all elk and bison in and around Yellowstone National Park should be vaccinated, if not eradicated. Wildlife conservationists have rejected that option as impossible or unreasonable. Some have responded that because brucellosis originally came from domestic livestock and doesn't harm elk and bison populations, it is an agricultural concern, not a wildlife issue.

In fact, this is not an elk problem, nor a bison problem, nor a cattle problem. It's a Montana problem. Brucellosis should concern every Montanan, because it's in the state's best interest to foster and maintain a healthy livestock industry and healthy wildlife populations. With that in mind, Montana must do a better job of assessing and reducing the risk of transmission.

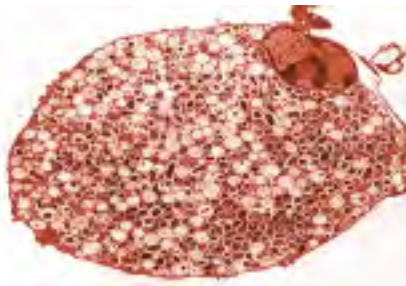
Since 1981, this department has tested nearly 7,000 elk for brucellosis exposure, mostly in the Greater Yellowstone area north and west of the park. The results show rates ranging from 0 to 5.5 percent. In 2006, FWP established a committee to improve brucellosis surveillance across the state. Last year we expanded testing, with hunter and landowner help, in six key areas: the Madison, Paradise, and Shields valleys, and areas near Gardiner, Bridger, and the Gravelly Mountains. Unfortunately, few of the more than 2,000 test kits we distributed to hunters and landowners produced usable samples.

This year we plan to redouble efforts to collect blood samples from hunter-harvested elk in the Paradise and Madison valleys and in Carbon County. The immediate objective is to better understand the disease's geographic range and identify and learn where elk and cattle are coming into contact with each other most often. This information is fundamental to effective risk management that might include adjusting livestock and wildlife management practices.

Tolerating current brucellosis uncertainties and risk is not an option; Montana's livestock industry and ranching families are too important to this state. But slaughtering or inoculating elk herds that pose a small risk of disease transmission is not an option either. It would be infeasible to eliminate or vaccinate entire herds of these wide-ranging wild animals. Besides, elk and elk hunting are also culturally and economically important to Montana.

Like so many problems that affect wildlife and livestock, this one has no quick or easy solution. But one thing is clear: Finger pointing and laying blame won't accomplish anything. Everyone who has a stake in this matter needs to work together. That includes livestock growers, hunters, and representatives of federal and state agencies. Only then can we assess where disease transmission risk is highest and figure out how best to reduce the risk.

—M. Jeff Hagener, Director, Montana FWP



Colony of *Brucella abortus*

WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Q. When hunting, I have a hard time telling the difference between a hen pheasant and a sharp-tailed grouse. Any advice?

A. The two look similar, but there are three ways of distinguishing them on the wing. One, a hen pheasant makes no vocal noise when flushing, while a sharptail makes a cluck-cluck-cluck sound. Two, sharptails have white speckles

in the wing and breast, while hen pheasants do not. And three, sharptails have a distinctive flight pattern of three-wingflaps-then-glide, three-wingflaps-then-glide.

Q. Where can I find on-line maps showing public land and private land boundaries?

A. Public and private land ownership maps for all of Montana are maintained by the Montana Natural Heritage Program and Natural Resources Information System. These maps are a great resource for hunters, anglers, and other outdoors recreationists. Visit the site at <http://nris.state.mt.us/gis/ownmaps.asp>.