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What to do with a Persistently Infected (PI) Calf

The BVD Education Project - a BVD continuing education brief by Bill Hessman, DVM

This is a question for which there is no good answer and it gets asked a lot. You have identified an animal as PI in your operation and are not sure just what to do with it. First of all get the animal quarantined away from the rest of the population. By quarantine I mean remove the animal from any direct contact from the rest of the cattle. These PI animals serve as the primary reservoir for transmission of BVD virus. PI animals shed huge volumes of infectious doses of the virus daily that can infect others in the group causing continual health and performance costs.

Salvage slaughter is a good option if the PI animal is of adequate size. It is important to know that the BVD virus is not contagious to people. Most folks who eat beef have consumed this virus already.

If the PI animal is too small for salvage slaughter the animal can be fed in quarantine to a salvage slaughter weight. Feeding PI animals does have some inherent risks and management issues. Feeding 1 or 2 PI's in a quarantine pen is often hard to manage. There is also the risk of mortality at any time while you are getting the animal to a slaughter weight. PI animals have a much greater risk of mortality than non-PI animals. Studies show that only approximately 50% of PI animals will live to a finish slaughter weight.

While sale of a PI animal is an option in some states, it should occur with full disclosure that the animal is PI. Not all states allow sale or even transport of PI animals. You need to check with your state to see if sale or transport of PI animals is allowed. Sale of PI animals without disclosure could lead to legal ramifications.

It is also important to understand that BVD is a reportable disease in some states. In states where BVD is reportable, the laboratory must notify the state that a positive BVD PI diagnosis was made and provide the state with information of ownership of the PI animal.

The final option is euthanasia. If you do not have the facilities or management to handle feeding PI's in a quarantine facility and the animal is not of size for salvage slaughter, humane euthanasia is an option.

While none of these options for disposal of PI animals appear to be a profitable outcome, they are. By removing the source of BVD virus transmission you will reduce the negative impact these animals have on the rest of the population and this almost always outweighs the losses of the PI animal.

The BVD Education Project - is a producer focused series of articles by Dr. Bill Hessman, DVM, Sublette Kansas, aimed at providing cattlemen with information that will allow them to protect their herds from the impact of Bovine Viral Diarrhea Virus (BVDV or BVD) and persistent infection (BVD-PI).