

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

The health threat to U.S. livestock

High interest rates and budget cuts are permitting disease to spread, with the nation's meat and milk supplies at stake.

A prominent research veterinarian cites "high interest rates" as the biggest threat to the health of farm livestock in the United States. It has taken 40 years to build up an incomparable standard of animal health and productivity, through farm management and through disease detection and control programs. This is the foundation of the national meat and milk supply, and should be a resource for upgrading world diets. However, budget cuts and the farm income crisis threaten to destroy the entire livestock system.

It would only take four or five years to turn the clock back 40 years in terms of bovine tuberculosis and brucella—two debilitating cattle ailments we have the means to minimize. T.B. is now on the increase, and dairymen warn that brucellosis soon will be.

Because of budget cuts, the government canceled its T.B. control test subsidies to states, which have in turn canceled their payments to farmers to cover bills for veterinary T.B. inspections. Unable to even pay for household food and fuel, farmers are in no position to pay these new costs for standard veterinary care.

Each time cattle are shipped, they are supposed to be inspected and given a health certificate, which costs \$1 or \$2 a head. Until recently, the government reimbursed the farmer for these costs. Now the farmer is supposed to cover it. When you have no funds, \$100 for transporting 50 cows makes sneaking them across the border seem worth it.

Brucellosis and T.B. can make

rapid gains if not contained by constant regulation. During World War II, the Nazis required Denmark to send 20 percent of their cows to Germany every year. The Danes instituted underground cow disease testing, and shipped over all those animals that tested positively for brucella and tuberculosis. At war end, the Danish herd was small but clean; the German herd was sick with 50 to 60% T.B.

Next week the U.S. Animal Health Association is meeting in Texas; their subcommittee on bovine T.B. will be conferring on what can be done about the increase in disease. The current milk "PIK" or payment-in-kind program is another factor downgrading herd health. Farmers are paid \$10 per hundred pounds of milk they do not produce each month for 15 months beginning last January. The public rationale is to reduce the milk "surpluses." In reality, there is no surplus, as the rising consumer milk prices and shortages dramatically show. There has been a cap placed on U.S. dairy exports by the world dairy cartel companies (Nestles, Unilever, and the New Zealand Dairy Board) and the International Monetary Fund.

Farmers reduce milk output mainly by culling herds. Since last fall, more than 300,000 milk cows have been culled, well above normal herd management rates. In addition, some farmers are deliberately underfeeding their animals to decrease milk output, and stretching out the time between calving. This weakens highly conditioned animals, potentially causing

dangerous and severe health problems.

Over the whole 15-month period of the milk PIK diversion plan, an estimated 887,860 milk cows will go to slaughter, which is at least 337,000 more than normal cull rates. The national beef herd is shrinking so fast that by year's end, it will be at the lowest level since 1969. The hog and pig inventory is down at least 9% from last year, and falling. Farmers are being forced to cut back and to go out of operation so fast that our food supply is now a national security issue.

All types of farm animals are subject to disease outbreaks. Scrapie is a disease that attacks the central nervous system of sheep, and is almost always fatal. It has a long incubation period, taking 18 to 42 months before clinical signs appear. It first came to the United States from England in the mid-1950s, and because swift action was not taken by government agencies to destroy the four infected flocks in New York and Ohio, it has now spread nationally. So far, 22 cases have been reported this year, higher than in 1956. However, many farmers do not recognize it, or if they do, quietly eliminate the animal and contact animals, because if they report the case, they will be required to kill their livestock with no indemnification. An indemnity of merely \$10 to \$20 a head could provide the needed incentive to make a regulatory program work.

Toxoplasmosis is a microscopic parasite that affects fetuses. The cycle of the disease is known, and includes cats, from which pregnant women can acquire the parasite and produce a severely brain-damaged child. Abortions in 16 flocks of sheep in Iowa, Maryland, Montana, Minnesota, and South Dakota have been traced to the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Government R&D and regulatory and financial help for sheep-growers are essential to contain this disease.