Texas Association of Dairymen

DAIRY COWS AMONG HURRICANE KATRINA REFUGEES
By John Cowan

Human beings aren't the only refugees from Hurricane Katrina. Some of those displaced by the powerful storm and searching for new homes are of the four-legged variety.

An estimated 300 dairy farms in Louisiana and Mississippi were impacted by the hurricane, and cows from the farms are being transported elsewhere. In addition, four milk processing plants were knocked out of commission, forcing other facilities to take on larger loads.

At this point, consumers should not see milk prices rise because of the storm and its fallout, as has been the case with gasoline.

The goal is to keep milk available and affordable for consumers, who drink an estimated 22 gallons of fluid milk per year, in addition to other dairy products. In addition, the dairy industry is scrambling to care for cows from affected areas so that they stay healthy and able to produce milk.

We know of three herds that have been trucked through Texas to New Mexico. No cows have yet been relocated to Texas, although it is a possibility in the coming days and weeks as dairy industry representatives are better able to assess the conditions and needs of the Gulf Coast region's dairies.

Texas officials are temporarily waiving the normal paperwork required for cross-border transport of dairy cows through our state because of the urgent need to get those cows settled and back on a regular milking schedule. Dairy cattle staying in Texas will need to have a negative TB test.

Normally, a dairy cow is milked at least twice a day. Otherwise, her milk will stop flowing, and she is in danger of developing mastitis, a condition in which bacteria causes an infection of the mammary gland. Stress also can cause mastitis.

If a cow develops this disease, her milk cannot be sold. It can take another lactation cycle – about a year – for her normal milk production to return.

The cows themselves aren't the only concern.

Just like many of the residences in the area, some dairy farms also were flooded and have no electricity or running water. Feed stockpiles have been destroyed, and farmers are scrambling to find sustenance for their herds. Blocked and destroyed roads also are making it difficult to get milk off the farm to the processing facilities.

Transportation also faces challenges with the partial destruction of Interstate 10 in Louisiana. Traffic – including milk tankers – flowing through the region must be diverted to other highways, adding miles to

trips. In this era of high-priced gasoline, the greater use of fuel and its higher cost also is impacting the dairy industry, as well as others.

Just as Americans have dug deep to help those whose lives have been shattered by Hurricane Katrina, so the dairy industry is stepping forward to help. Donation funds have been established, and the industry is compiling a list of available resources that could assist distressed dairy farms, asking dairy producers to share generators, feed or cattle housing to share.

Finally, dairies are stepping up to the plate to help the tens of thousands of evacuees who now call Texas "home." Many refugee facilities require non-perishable food produces and can't take fresh milk donations at this time. One major milk company's Houston facility was allowed, however, to donate 450 cases of milk to Red Cross shelters in that area.

And Texas milk cooperatives have pressed their tanker trucks into service to deliver much needed water to Louisiana and Mississippi.

The dairy industry stands ready to help, whether those in need have two legs or four.

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