

Update on Toxic Substance Fed to Wisconsin Dairy Cows

by Jan Shepel

In March 2024, *The Milkweed* reported unexplained, serious health problems afflicting dairy cows on about 50 farms in Northeast Wisconsin. Farmers saw previously healthy and productive cows sicken and sometimes die. Even if the livestock didn't die, their milk production dropped by anywhere from 10 to 50 pounds per cow per day.

As Pete Hardin reported early last year, symptoms included weight loss, lost milk production and a rash of displaced abomasums (DAs) requiring surgery. Heifers were unaffected by these terrible symptoms until they freshened and started getting the feed that was mixed for lactating cows.

Farmers worked with their veterinarians, who were stumped. The cow docs checked for mycotoxins in their on-farm feed and those tests were negative. The vexing problem persisted for several months before they determined that a toxic substance was substituted for sodium bicarbonate in the mineral pack sold to these farmers to use in their total mixed rations.

In Northeast Wisconsin, Adell Co-op and Great Lakes Milling were the sources of some of the toxic "sodium bicarb" that caused this tragedy. But the two feed mills' operators were never informed that something was being substituted in the material they were blending for their farmers. Their supplier and the feed mills were never informed of a substitution. It turns out that the problematic substance was a toxic industrial chemical that is (unsurprisingly) not approved as a livestock feed ingredient. Farmers who ended up with the toxic material on their farms later found out that its pH was between 11 and 12 and that it contained high levels of fluoride. Experts tell us that excess levels of fluoride will cause osteomalacia – outflow of calcium from bones.

At the time when *The Milkweed* broke the story it was thought that 40 dairy producers got their feed from Adell Co-op, plus 10 or 15 were customers at nearby Great Lakes Milling, which also distributed the toxic material to its customers. At last year's annual meeting of the Adell Cooperative, officials admitted that there was a problem with feed toxicity. At that time cooperative officials hired a lawyer and notified their insurance company. Farmers were told to expect compensation for their losses by the end of October 2024 or at least by the end of the year. But sadly, farmers whose dairy livestock were harmed have not seen a penny of compensation. For their losses. "I lost a lot of good cows," said one of the farmers. "As of now, nobody has gotten a dime," he added.

Farmers we talked to, who did not want their names used in print for fear of some kind of retribution, told us that they feel like they are getting stonewalled and they may never get any compensation from corporate insurance companies. A small group of the determined farmers have decided to place telephone calls to the co-op (with which they no longer do business) and to the insurance company just to make sure they are not forgotten. One farmer estimated the cumulative claims from all the farmers probably reach into the millions of dollars. "We didn't know we were feeding it," said one farmer.

The insurance investigation involved bringing in a forensic veterinarian last summer. That investigation concluded that the farmers' losses were actual and that the event in question truly did occur. At first, herd veterinarians working with the farms thought maybe the cows could be suffering from cancer — some of the symptoms matched. But that would have been a lot of instances of cancer.

Then at a local social gathering, the farmers happened to compare notes and realized it was not just one of them having the problems — many were. In addition to lost production, cows were stricken with DAs — including cows that were going dry. In that group of cattle, DAs are almost never seen.

In an effort to turn over every stone, farmers thought it might be incorrect feed mixing procedures so they replaced scales and load cells on their TMR mixers, not realizing at that time that this wasn't going to solve the problem.

One farmer figured out the problem in his barn by feeding one feedstuff or another to individual cows. When he got to the pile that the cows wouldn't eat, he figured he had found the culprit. He lost about \$80,000 in three months in terms of vet bills, culling losses and lower milk income. His vet told him they figured the losses are closer to \$100,000.

We called Adell Co-op's general manager Michael Kempke, who has been with the co-op for about two years, so he was in his job during this tragedy. He told us that the incident involved multiple feed mills but he doesn't know how the others are handling their farm customers' claims. Adell's farmer-members' claims have been turned over to the property and casualty insurance companies Triangle and American Family, he said. Those carriers are handling all the farmers' claims. Kremke's understanding is that the feed ingredient is "not regulated."

We heard from some of the farmers that they have cut ties with the co-op — except for their faint hope that they will get some compensation. Kempke couldn't tell us how many farmers remain members of the co-op today.

Some sources with knowledge of the situation said the material came from a foreign country and was called "trona-carb." Some of the farmers contemplated lawsuits and talked to attorneys ... but quickly found that nobody wanted to go up against the parties involved.

One of the problems with this situation was that cows refused to eat their "perfectly good" total mixed rations. One farmer told us that he couldn't figure out why his high-producing milk cows were crawling through fences to get to the "crappy, marsh-hay dry cow feed." As he later discovered, it was because the dry cows were not getting the toxic material in their ration.

At the beginning of this tragic toxicity event, farmers were told (as always) that it must be something they were doing wrong. Turns out they were doing everything right, they just had been sold bad inputs. "I wouldn't wish this upon anybody — even my worst enemy," said one farmer. "I lost some of my best cows, producing 50,000 pounds of milk."

One farmer involved in these losses said he was so financially strapped by the toxicity event that he couldn't afford to buy fertilizer for his corn crop last spring, so as a result he had a pretty bad crop and has less home-grown feed to feed to his cows this year. The results of the toxic material in the feed appear to have a long tail for the farmers involved.

State ag department vets unfamiliar with problem

Mike Murray, the Fertilizer, Feed and Containment Programs Unit Supervisor at Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) told *The Milkweed* that his bureau had not been aware of farmers being affected by a toxic substance in the feed they put in front of their cows.

His Agrichemical Management Bureau is the part of the state agency that requires tonnage reports and explained that they have labeling requirements for every kind of feed that is put in front of animals from dogs and cats through livestock. Feed mills and other dealers are licensed and regulated by his divi-

sion as a way to make sure that animals are safe but also as a way to make sure the food chain is safe. "We always prioritize livestock that are going into the food chain," Murray told us in a telephone interview.

During this time frame — late 2023 and early 2024 — his inspectors had investigated other complaints that turned out to be metal shavings in a feed. But his bureau had not been made aware of this toxic material in mineral fed to dairy cows at a large number of farms. He admitted that in some ways he's not surprised that they didn't hear about this event if farmers were working with the grain elevators that sold them the bad mineral.

"This is very unfortunate and it should be preventable. We require labeling and identification on feed ingredients but it relies on people doing the right thing." Asked if he thought the agency might have been brought in if the case went to insurance claims he told us that it wouldn't necessarily land on his desk. "We would be happy to get involved if that were part of an investigation but in this case we were not brought in."

With all respect, it's hard to fathom how DATCP's veterinarians could have been oblivious — and so remained more than a year after the outbreak — to the mysterious, months-long malady afflicting thousands of Wisconsin dairy livestock. Fact is: In late March 2024 — during the American Association of Bovine Practitioners' first national teleconference involving the discovery of avian influenza infections in dairy herds in Texas and New Mexico — the problem in Wisconsin was discussed.

The Adell Co-op will hold its annual meeting in late winter. Hopefully at that time dairy farmers will be able to get specific answers about what happened to contaminate feed they purchased. Even better ... insurance company representative handing out compensatory checks would be most welcome and overdue.

Editor's addenda:

1) Shortly after the March 2024 issue was mailed out, we received a phone call from a Richland County, Wisconsin dairy producer who reported identical symptoms in his milking herd. Those health problems started in early November 2023 — same time as the problems with dairy cattle in eastern Wisconsin. The Richland County dairy family — by March 2024 — had lost 180 out of 400 milk cows to the unknown problem. He explained that he purchased all of his minerals from one supplier — Renaissance Nutrition.

2) In this instance, the chain of communication regarding animal health in Wisconsin was or is broken. Veterinarians in eastern Wisconsin who became familiar with multiple herds facing similar, inexplicable herd health problems should have promptly consulted the state veterinarian's office.

Jan. 1: Milk Cow Numbers Stable, But Much Data Omitted

For what it's worth ... the January 1, 2025 Cattle Report found that the number of milk cows in the United States was remarkably similar to one year ago. As of the first of this year, USDA enumerated 9.349 million milk cows. That number is 2,500 more than one year prior ... statistically no change.

However ... starting in January 2025, the USDA did not include 19 states in that report — listing them as "NA" (not available). Significant among the "missing" states were Indiana, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, North Carolina, Utah and Vermont. In 2024, those states had a combined 500,000 milk cows. All those "NA" holes sin the data render this report far less reliable than in prior years.

Important to note: in 2024, the USDA cancelled its mid-year Cattle Report — from which the dairy cow and heifer data is created. That move drew scorn from the livestock industry, which was ear-deep in high cattle prices and searching for supply signals from a timely Cattle Report. But USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack cancelled that mid-summer report, citing budget woes. (Vilsack kept throwing money out the window otherwise, trying to gain votes for his political allies ... without much success.)

Failure by the USDA to survey more states' milk cow and replacement heifer data is unfortunate.

That same survey found 3.914 million replace-

ment dairy heifers — a decline of less than 1% from the 1/1/24 total. However, for similar reasons as the milk cow total, the replacement dairy heifer number must be viewed skeptically. Nineteen states were not included in the most recent survey.

Obvious deterioration of the quality of USDA's dairy data is chilling.

German Water Buffalo Herd Has Foot & Mouth Disease

A German dairy herd was diagnosed with dreaded Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in January, according to Dairy Market News' International Dairy Report for Europe dated January 27-31, 2025 (p. 8). That brief note read in full:

"No additional cases of foot and mouth disease (FMD) have been detected in Germany since the initial case was confined in a herd of water buffalo in Brandenburg, Germany on January 10. The European Commission updated its previous protection and surveillance zone on January 24, lasting until February 11. The German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture lifted existing bans on moving cloven-hooved animals for the states of Brandenburg and Berlin."