

# Research Briefs

## **Brucellosis Media Survey**

Cattle brucellosis is a tough disease to conquer. Forceful state-federal actions with sound technical backing and funding is not enough. It takes commitment—especially by cattlemen and dairymen—and this means a great deal of communication.

Supporting brucellosis eradication through information activities calls for sustained effort by a lot of people. Some communications must come from the national level, but individual farmers and ranchers are more likely to be influenced by information reaching them from local and state sources.

While direct "one-on-one" communications between program officials and farmers are important, the news media are unrivaled in ability to deliver information on brucellosis to the many who need it, when they most need to know it. Those of us involved in brucellosis communications occasionally need to take stock of news media coverage. This survey deals with print media only. Focus is on the extent of coverage—categorized by sources.

Press clippings reviewed in this survey were dated Jan. 1 through March 31, 1981. They include only clippings made available to USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service by five regional information offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, New York, and San Francisco. Our Washington office subscribes to no clipping service.

In making this assessment, it was assumed that the print media most likely to serve as sources of brucellosis information for those who need it are the farm and livestock journals. So an approximate word count was obtained from those publications by numbering lines down and multiplying by words across. For the daily-weekly press clippings, column inches were measured.

Clippings were divided into four categories: (1) those from farm and livestock journals based on USDA releases; (2) those from farm and livestock journals not based on USDA

releases; (3) those from dairy and weekly newspapers based on USDA releases; and (4) those from dairy and weekly newspapers not based on USDA releases.

There were a total of 185 brucellosis clippings, with some 84,000 words, from farm and livestock journals.

Eighty of these stories, comprising nearly 33,000 words, were based on USDA releases. They were clipped from a total of 35 publications, mostly monthlies, with a combined circulation of 1.5 million. The largest was *Hoard's Dairyman* with a circulation of 225,000. The smallest was *Business Farmer* with a circulation of 3,000.

The 105 brucellosis clippings from farm and livestock journals that were not based on USDA releases comprised slightly more than 51,000 words. They were from a total of 52 publications, again, mostly monthlies, with a combined circulation of 5.6 million. The biggest was *Farm Journal* with a circulation of 1,350,000. The smallest was *Nevada Rancher* with a 3,500 circulation.

Turning to clippings from the daily-weekly press, there were a total of 348 stories totaling some 5,758 column inches.

USDA releases accounted for 96 clips, comprising 2,158 column inches of coverage.

There were 252 clippings from the daily-weekly press of stories originated by state and local sources. These clips comprised more than 3,600 column inches. This space is roughly equivalent to the entire news coverage of a large city daily. More than 90 percent of these clippings (154) were from state sources—such as state veterinarians or agriculture commissioners. The rest were from local sources as follows:

Farm Bureau members (20), county agents (16), cattleman/farm association members (16), local reporters with bylines (13), farm/agriculture editors (8), other columnists (6), veterinary medical association officials (4), local USDA officials (4), extension veterinarians (2), wire service reporters (2), researchers (2), fillers (2), livestock conglomerates (1), legislators (1), and public health officials (1).

The great majority of the 154 clippings from state sources were from two states: Texas (71) and Missouri (69). An impressive 10 percent of the Missouri clippings were identified as front-page items.

Datelines reflected strong coverage of brucellosis in four other states: Oklahoma (31), Florida (21), Montana (13), and Utah (10).

Other clipping datelines were from : Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

These clippings represent a good sampling of brucellosis coverage in the popular press. This coverage is gratifying, but it also leaves room for a great deal of improvement. There was no coverage of local origin from 16 states. All but one of the states with no local coverage had one or more cattle herds under quarantine for brucellosis.

But even being at the zero infection level should be no cause for drastically reducing informational initiatives. There's always the risk of brucellosis being reintroduced into a state. So farmers need to keep informed about the disease—until it is eradicated.

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### **Where Ohio Newspapers Get Agricultural News**

An Ohio State Study aimed at finding attitudes of Ohio newspaper editors toward agricultural news. More specifically, the study tried to find: if editors printed agricultural news at all; their sources of agricultural news; their criteria for using agricultural news; for those receiving the extension news packet, their comments on it; and the demographics of any farm editors or agricultural writers on the staff.

The study was set up to find out if news releases issued by Ohio's Agricultural Research and Development Center which appeared in the extension news packet, were used by Ohio newspaper editors. . .in terms of subject matter, story length, story position in the packet and to how much or little releases were edited and when they were printed.

First we went to editors on daily and weekly papers and asked them what they did about editing and publishing news from the packet. Then we went through clipping service returns from these papers to see what the actual behavior of the editors was.

The project involved responses of 264 out of 345 Ohio newspaper editors on a survey and the evaluation and content analysis of 1,792 clippings. The 264 editor questionnaires represented a 76.5% response rate.

One finding of interest: Order of presentation in the packet made a difference. The first release in the packet was published significantly more often than releases in any other position in the packet. In fact, the farther you went in the packet, the less chance a release had of being published. Good stories buried in thick packets get overlooked. As far as OSU was concerned, releases were placed in the packet in a random fashion. . .the most interesting or important story didn't necessarily appear in the first position on top of the packet.

More than 3/4 of the 68 small community dailies had a farm editor on the staff. Fifty percent of the 12 metro dailies did, 40% of the 118 rural weeklies, and only 11% of 59 urban weeklies. Most spent more time on other assignments than on agriculture, and usually had little agricultural background.

The 88 editors receiving the packet regularly tended to rank animal and crop production and agricultural research higher than did the 148 editors who did not receive the packet. About 75% indicated that they would like to receive news tips with sources given for followup by their own staff, along with the regular stories in the packet.

Other evidence indicated that they did not follow up as often as they thought they might. When we studied clippings, staff written stories from packet stories were minimal. And most editors didn't tamper with the story lead or body of the story.

Story length seemed to make little difference in whether or not a release was used—up to three pages double-spaced. At four pages, the released tended to be edited heavily.

Getting stories on the wire service assured good pickup of stories. Interestingly, clippings of release stories appeared at times from the nonpacket newspapers. That came about as they occasionally picked the same story up from a wire service. Or, a county agent sent the stories to the papers, often with a byline, and that seemed to help get the story used locally. Editors acknowledged that agents were a good source of agricultural information.

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## A Media Survey Checklist

While the items below don't report research, they are points you might want to think about before you survey the media in your area:

- like a good press release a good survey has a local angle. (Why should I complete this questionnaire?)

- make your objectives clear and measurable. (What do you expect to document?)

- review relevant literature. (Has someone else already developed a system?)

- personalize and use names as much as possible. (If the survey is important, why not send a personal letter?)

- make it simple. (Why make it so sophisticated that your survey cannot be understood?)

- test your questionnaire. (Why not try a sample survey to test your survey?)

- develop plans to analyze and publicize your results. (Why not let your respondents know the results?)

- use the survey to develop new contacts and renew old ones. (Maybe the survey can provide the impetus.)

- justify what you want to know. (How will you be able to use the data to provide better material?)

- include other project objectives, interrelationships and interdependencies that may alter your results. (For example, what if a media outlet does not use any outside material?)

- allow for followup. (Why not build this year's survey on last year's?)

- take advantage of your computer specialists, sociologists, consulting centers, business schools, testing centers to be sure your design is valid. (Why not tap their expertise?)

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