October 28, 2024

Alpaca Owners Association
2024 USAHA annual meeting report

The following report summarizes my attendance at the 128th annual meeting of the United State Animal Health Association (USAHA) as the Alpaca Owners Association representative. This is my first year as your representative, replacing Dr. Patrick Long who previously served for as the representative for 14 years.

This meeting is held in conjunction with the American Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians (AAVLD). It serves as a gathering of government and industry officials as well as producers to learn about current issues regarding animal health, both domestic and foreign, and to help shape legislation pertaining to livestock and animal health. The first two days of the meeting are predominantly AAVLD meetings which I did not attend.

The major theme at this year's meeting was the High Path Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak that occurred in dairy cattle this summer. The novel disease event has occupied many state and federal animal health organizations for the past seven months. The organizational coordination and response, as well as the scientific findings that resulted from this outbreak have been incredible.

My first day of attendance was Sunday October 13th. I attended meetings of the subcommittee on Scrapie and Identification meeting, the subcommittee on Rabies, and the Animal Research Services' update on HPAI. I also attended the Western District meeting (as I am based in Colorado), the District at Large meeting and the New Member Orientation. Two short scientific presentations: one on lipid toxicity in a small group of alpacas and a second on new parasites tests in ruminants were also presented on Sunday. I was not able to attend these sessions but could read their findings in the daily proceedings.

The Scrapie subcommittee reported on the challenges the US faces as we reach the last few years of trying to eradicate scrapie in the United States. If no new cases are found, the US will be declared scrapie free in 3.5 years for the first time in nearly 80 years. How the sheep and goat industries address disease surveillance post-eradication may serve as a model for how AOA fashions its policy for BVDV. Both of these diseases are now at very low levels in their respective populations, but both can have serious health consequences if they are allowed to resurge.

The Rabies subcommittee discussed the prevalence of rabies in wildlife populations and how significant this disease continues to be. Oral vaccination programs have eliminated the canine variant in the US and have reduced rabies in the raccoon population by 77%. However, a case report of a single kitten that showed up in Nebraska with raccoon rabies showed how quickly this disease could spread through human-assisted transportation. It also highlighted the intensive response federal and

Signe G. Balch, DPhil, DVM

Cherry Valley Veterinary Services, LLC

10245 Jones Road Larkspur, CO 80118

719.310.8439

balchdvm@gmail.com

state officials mount in order to keep rabies variants from spreading outside of their known distribution areas. This meeting was a reminder of how important it is to continue to keep our producers aware of this disease and possible vaccination strategies.

The HPAI update was a fascinating look at this recent disease outbreak. It is now known that dairy cow related HPAI virus is no longer being found in wild birds. The only time that the virus spread from birds to cows occurred one time in late 2023. Since then, all the outbreaks of the virus found in dairy cows have occurred laterally from other cows. All the poultry infected with the dairy cow virus strain, including the 9m birds killed in Colorado, have all been spillover from infected cows not from wild birds. How this virus replicates in cows and the tissues it can be found in was determined in ARS labs over the last few months. The results of these studies can be found in a new article in Nature: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-024-08166-6.

The District At Large meeting also discussed HPAI but from the prospective of the producers and animal industries involved. During this ongoing outbreak, the dairy cow industry was hit by a disease event it never anticipated. It had to pivot quickly to educate producers about implementing strict biosecurity, find ways to communicate with producers about complex scientific concepts and still gain their trust enough to complete the testing needed to help halt this outbreak as quickly as it could be while still keeping commercial shut downs and economic losses to a minimum. None of this was easy and it was only through the diligent work of many officials, producers and scientists that the disease is as controlled today as it is. I think AOA could and should look at how the dairy industry has handled the last seven months and learn from them. We should take steps to begin discussing topics such as biosecurity and disease identification and prevention, before we face a similar disease outbreak. And, even though camelids do not have an official secure industry plan, perhaps as an industry we should use the Secure Sheep and Wool Supply plan to help educate our producers about protecting their farms from disease outbreaks. If we are proactive about disease prevention, we might avoid an outbreak as severe as HPAI has been for the dairy industry.

Monday October 14th centered around attending meetings including the subcommittee on Tuberculosis, the committee on Food and Feed Safety, the committee on Diseases of Poultry and the committee on Animal Emergency Management. The Tuberculosis subcommittee provided a good review of this disease in the US and its endemic prevalence in the deer population in Michigan. Trial results of oral TB vaccination programs for these deer as well as trial vaccine programs in calves in Baja California gave insight into how challenging eradicating this disease will be. State officials from Michigan detailed the protocols they have for monitoring TB transfer from deer to cattle and other mammals in their state. The fact that 8 people in Michigan have active TB infections, likely due to exposure to deer, is a reminder that this disease is still one to pay attention to.

The Food and Feed Safety committee focused primarily on food borne illnesses linked to raw milk, including HPAI. Evidence conclusively shows that the HPAI virus is found in extraordinary large numbers in milk and can be transferred to other mammals such as cats (often fatally) through raw milk. The CDC presented data to show that unpasteurized milk is

responsible for a greater than average number of food borne diseases outbreaks in humans. For these reasons I would continue to encourage AOA to urge producers not to feed raw milk to young camelids until HPAI is more contained and hopefully eradicated.

The committee on Poultry Diseases highlighted the enormous efforts Michigan and Colorado have taken to try and control TB and HPAI outbreaks, respectively, in their states. The complexity and resource-intensive nature of such responses serves as a reminded that preventing disease is always easier then trying to containing it. The AVMA representative gave an update on depopulation techniques. In general the federal and state governments are moving away from requiring mass animal culling in the face of a disease outbreak but they admit that at times animal depopulation is needed. They have worked to update their policies in light of recent public criticism. It is of note that no cattle have been mandated to be killed during the HPAI outbreak. All culling has been done by the producers based on their own production criteria.

The committee on Animal Emergency Management continued the discussion on depopulation and how difficult it can be to do it well. For example, if hundreds of pigs are depopulated how do you dispose of the carcasses in a quick and efficient matter? How do you get the resources to bury or incinerate them if there is an emergency? These are questions, that while difficult, should be considered by all animal industries, including the alpaca industry, prior to to them actually needing to be answered. The state veterinarian of Texas gave a brief update of the Secure Beef Supply Plan in his home state. It was again a reminder that the alpaca industry should begin engaging its producers with similar ideas and discussions. Preparing our producers to deal with disease outbreak and emergencies is an excellent way to prepare them and hopefully prevent future disease outbreaks..

October 15th was filled with meetings of the committee on Wildlife, the committee on Foreign and Emerging Diseases, the committee on Sheep, Goat and Camelids (our home committee) and the committee on Parasitic and Vector Borne Diseases. The committee on Wildlife gave an in-depth review of the status of brucellosis in the elk populations in the feeding areas of Wyoming. The difficulty in eradicating that disease was highlighted, as was the threat of Chronic Wasting Disease encroachment on those populations. Presenters in this committee also stressed that HPAI virus is now no longer being found in wild birds. However, it may return when the migrations begin later this year. The Foreign and Emerging Diseases committee provided insights into how the European Union has managed and continues to constrain their outbreaks of African Swine Fever, Peste des petits ruminants, sheep pox and HPAI. The US federal officials also described what steps the US had taken, particularly in Puerto Rico, to enhance surveillance for African Swine Fever.

The committee on Sheep, Goats and Camelids presented the findings of the USDA's most recent surveys of sheep producers in the US. Many of the findings, I feel, can be applied to the alpaca industry as well. Interestingly, 25% of all current sheep producers say they do not expect to be in business in the next 5 years. Retirement and economic factors are listed as reasons. The AOA may want to consider that something similar could happen in our industry as well. The FDA presented their plans to improve drug availability for minor species (alpacas are considered a

minor food animal species). This may pave the way for more approved drugs for camelids, particularly if we continue to contribute to committees such as this one. Discussion was also started in this committee about trying to harmonize the requirements for TB and brucellosis testing across the US. Alpacas were highlighted as one of the species that had random and unsubstantiated testing requirements. This committee is going to begin discussions with the relevant agencies to try and streamline the testing requirements for both of these diseases. Continued participation in these discussions may help reduce our testing burden for alpacas as they travel across states for shows.

The final committee meeting, on Parasitic and Vector Borne Diseases, had multiple presenters. Data on 2024 cases of Epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHDV) and Bluetongue were presented showing an anticipated emergence of the diseases in the Mid-Atlantic region. Researchers from Kansas State University (KSU) discussed how different insect vectors such as midges can transmit diseases, including Vesicular stomatitis (VS), that are generally thought to be carried by other insects species. KSU also showed that midges may be responsible for the overwintering of VS in some environments. The researchers also presented results from their investigations into how common houseflies can be used as disease sentinels and help identify antibiotic resistant bacteria in a population of livestock. USDA-PHIS investigators from Texas updated us on the spread of the Asian Longhorn tick and the large number of diseases they are finding being carried by this tick in the field. How significant transmission of these diseases is has yet to be determined, but habitat suitability models suggest that this tick could spread across the US. This Texas group also outlined the progress being made against the screw worm outbreak in Central America which has involved breeding and distributing billions of sterile fly larvae. All in all, this committee demonstrated just how important a role insect play in the propagation and control of livestock diseases.

The Board of Directors met for the first time on the 15th and I was introduced as the new AOA representative to the board. The board has agreed to try and establish a membership level for state branches of national associations. USAHA is an organization that welcomes producers to join and provide insight and feedback. Having members that represent state branches of national industries is a way of inviting more producers to attend the conferences. AOA should consider ways to try and take advantage of this new membership level once it is announced as I believe our producers can contribute to and learn from attending this conference.

The final day of the conference included additional USAHA membership meetings and Board of Directors meetings during which 23 resolutions were discussed and voted on. A keynote address was given outline the history of the influenza virus, placing the current outbreak in context and proposing avenues of thought to pursue as we continue to learn about this fascinating, highly variable infective agent.

Overall I thought this meeting was an excellent exposure to a diverse array of people, science and policy. I strongly encourage AOA to continue to be involved with this organization and to put to use the extensive knowledge its membership, as a whole, is willing to share.

Final thoughts

- This is a conference that it is worth continuing to attend. This is a venue where the AOA voice can be heard and be used to help shape animal health and animal industry policy
- AOA should continue to build it presence as an animal industry
- AOA should look to the sheep and goat industries to gain insight into production trends and how diseases such as scrapie are managed once they are ‘eradicated’
- AOA should be proactive in trying to address animal disease prevention: discuss vaccinations, biosecurity and secure industry plans with producers. Consider how our producers can adapt recommendations from the Secure Sheep and Wool Supply report to protect our own producers (https://securesheepwool.org)
- AOA should encourage producers to become members and attendees in order to further amplify our voice

Sincerely,

Signe G. Balch, DPhil, DVM