

Texas Animal Health Commission
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New Year Means New Regulation for Texas Cattle

Thinking about selling, leasing, bartering or even giving away a breeding bull? On January 1, Texas bulls that undergo a change of ownership (except to slaughter) must be either certified as a virgin bull or be tested first for cattle trichomoniasis, a protozoal disease that can cause cows to abort very early in pregnancy. Infected bulls carry the microscopic “bug” that causes trichomoniasis without any signs and can transmit the single-celled protozoa to cows during breeding.

“There is no effective treatment for bulls, and once infected, they can continue to spread trichomoniasis when they breed,” said Dr. Dee Ellis, who will be Texas’ state veterinarian and head of the TAHC, as of January 1. “Infected cows may clear the infection, but only if they are given rest from breeding for 120-150 days—an expensive option, as a calf crop will be missed. A vaccine also is available to help in the management of infected cows, but it will not prevent infection.”

The country’s western states have long-standing cattle trichomoniasis regulations. About two years ago, the Texas ranching industry requested similar regulations, to protect against the introduction and the spread of cattle trichomoniasis, or “trich.” For months, representatives from the state’s ranching, marketing and veterinary industries worked with the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) to develop effective regulations to control the disease, which affects herd productivity and an operation’s bottom line. In April 2009, the TAHC, the state’s livestock and poultry health regulatory agency, enacted requirements for bulls entering Texas. In-state regulations were delayed until January 1, 2010.

“For months, we have worked with the Texas cattle industry to inform producers and have participated in many meetings about cattle trichomoniasis and the regulations. More than 600 accredited private veterinarians in Texas have been certified to collect samples for trichomoniasis testing, and we are ready to implement the intrastate regulations for bulls undergoing a change of ownership in Texas,” said Dr. Ellis.

Dr. Ellis said the regulations will apply to bulls being sold, traded, leased or undergoing any change of ownership (except for slaughter). The regulations include three basic steps:

1. Identify the bull. Identification is essential for matching animals with virgin bull certificates or test documents. One form of identification is needed, and it may be an official USDA ear tag, breed registry brand or tattoo, an 840 flap, bangle or an 840 radio frequency identification device. If the bull originated from another state, it may have that state’s official state of origin trichomoniasis ear tag (Texas does not have an official trich ear tag). An accredited veterinarian can apply an official USDA ear tag.
2. Certify virgin bulls. A breeder can certify the bull as a virgin, if the animal was raised away from cows after weaning, and the bull is 24 months of age or younger. A Texas-origin bull’s virgin status may be extended to 30 months, if the virgin certificate is signed also by the breeder’s accredited veterinarian. Virgin bulls are not required to have a trichomoniasis test prior to change of ownership. Virgin bull certificates are available at no cost on the TAHC web page at <http://www.tahc.state.tx.us>.

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3. Test older or non-virgin bulls. Bulls older than 30 months or bulls that were maintained with cows after weaning must have a negative trichomoniasis test within 30 days prior to change of ownership. A certified, accredited veterinarian must collect the sample for testing at the Texas Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory. While awaiting test results, which usually takes about a week, the bulls must be kept away from cows. Upon receipt of the negative test results, the animal is ready for change of ownership.

“Breeding bulls that haven’t been certified as virgins or tested are considered to be slaughter-only bulls,” said Dr. Ellis. “In some cases, however, buyers may want an untested bull, although they may be buying trouble. We have provisions under the regulations for untested bulls to be identified and moved under a TAHC-issued hold order and movement permit. The animal must be isolated from female cattle, and cannot be moved until it is tested within 30 days of purchase at the owner’s expense.”

“In Texas, two tests are accepted. One is the Real Time Polymerase Chain Reaction test, or PCR, which looks for the DNA of the protozoa. Because only one PCR test is needed to detect infection, this may become the preferred method for producers who want to move cattle more quickly. The second acceptable test is the culture test, and it involves looking for the protozoa under a microscope. A series of three culture tests is needed, each conducted at least seven days apart,” said Dr. Ellis.

“Because cattle trichomoniasis is a reportable disease, we will be notified regarding test-positive animals,” explained Dr. Ellis. “Test-positive bulls may undergo a confirmation test, provided the owner or the accredited, certified veterinarian makes the request within five days of the positive results.”

Because there is no effective treatment, infected bulls must go to slaughter within 30 days of confirmation. The remaining bulls in the herd will be held, isolated from female cattle, until they undergo two consecutive negative RT-PCR tests, each conducted at least seven days apart, or three consecutive negative culture tests, with each of the tests conducted at least seven days apart. When they are confirmed negative for trichomoniasis, the bulls remaining in the herd are free to be moved or to be commingled with cows.

“The cattle trichomoniasis regulations can save cattle producers a lot of money in the long run, because this disease greatly affects calf production. If you are obtaining a breeding bull, make sure the animal has been certified as a virgin or was tested—for your herd’s sake,” said Dr. Ellis. “We will be reviewing the regulations on a yearly basis with an industry working group, to ensure that the rules remain timely and effective.”

Texas’ trichomoniasis entry requirements for breeding bulls is similar to the intrastate regulations, but allows out-of-state bulls to be certified as virgins only until 24 months of age. Exhibition or competition bulls may enter Texas without a trichomoniasis test, but must be kept away from female cattle. The TAHC must be contacted in advance of entry for a waiver of the test requirement to be issued on exhibition bulls.

The TAHC’s cattle trichomoniasis regulations and additional information are available on the TAHC web site at: <http://www.tahc.state.tx.us> .

