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Your Mother Always Told You to Wash Your Hands

As the 2012 fair season approaches, our thoughts turn to freshly squeezed lemonade, cotton candy, carnival rides, and always my favorite part of the county fair...walking through the animal barns and seeing all the different animals. I remember as a kid walking through and seeing the chickens roosting in their cages, and there was always at least one rooster that crowed continuously! The goats were fun, because they would try to nibble your clothes through the fences if you got too close, and the cows always looked so happy and content lying on big piles of straw bedding, chewing their cud. One of the things I didn't know as a kid though is that animals can carry organisms that can make us sick. They can also make other animals sick.

What should be done? Biosecurity is a fancy term, but it is really very simple to put into practice and can protect both humans and animals. For example, fairs can provide hand washing stations at the entrances to all animal barns, encouraging people to wash their hands between contact with different animal groups, or before eating food, and not allowing food in areas where animals are housed. (Authors note: do you think this is the reason that so many types of fair foods are served on a stick? Less hand contact with food might reduce the risk of contamination. Something to ponder as you eat that deep fried candy bar, and twinkly!)

Another way to help prevent the spread of disease is to keep different species of animals separate from others. Dairy farms that ship milk are licensed by the state, and regulated under a document that is published by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health, and the Food and Drug Administration – called – called the Pasteurized Milk Ordinance, or PMO. The PMO was first published in 1924, as a guideline to reduce the risk of food borne illness associated with milk products. According to the PMO, a milking area must be kept free of swine and fowl (chickens, ducks, kittens, etc.) The public health reason behind this requirement states: "A clean interior reduces the chances of contamination of the milk or milk pails during milking. The presence of other animals increases the potential for the spread of disease." While fairs are not licensed to ship milk, milking animals are often at the fair, and will be milked while they are there. Keeping different species of animals separated will help reduce the risk of contaminating the milk. (Milk from the fairs should not be taken back to a farm and put in a bulk tank, but could be used to feed calves or other livestock on the farm, or disposed of at the fair.)

When animals return home from the fair, they should be kept isolated from the rest of the herd for at least two weeks. Animals that have been housed at the fair are often exposed to other animals, and diseases can be spread by visitors petting the animals and moving on to the next animal. Keeping them isolated at home can help prevent a disease from spreading in the home herd. Any equipment that has been taken to the fair should be cleaned with soap and water, and disinfected before being used again at the home farm.

By following these few practical steps, you can help keep you and your animals healthy. Have a safe and healthy 2012 fair season!

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