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Equine Piroplasmosis

A ranch in Kleberg County in south Texas is under quarantine after a 7-year-old Quarter Horse mare became ill and tested positive for equine piroplasmosis a tick-borne disease. An additional 31 horses on the ranch also tested positive for the disease later last month.

Equine piroplasmosis can affect horses, donkeys, mules, or zebras. It can cause clinical signs common to many diseases, including poor appetite and weight loss. Death can occur, but some infected equine animals might exhibit few or no signs of disease. Those animals that survive the acute phase of infection might continue to carry the parasite, which has been identified as *Theileria equi* (formerly known as *Babesia equi*), for long periods of time.

Equine Piroplasmosis Facts

- An infectious, tick-borne disease caused by two types of protozoal parasites, which attack the red blood cells.
- Characterized by fever, anemia, weight loss, jaundice, and, in some cases, death.
- Case fatality rate can be up to 20% in naive horses.
- The only treatment is a potent type of chemotherapy that can have serious side effects in some horses.
- Disease is spread by ticks, the use of contaminated needles, and possibly through blood-contaminated semen of infected stallions.
- Can be spread by some tick species in the United States, and a few species can pass the parasite transovarially (from mother to offspring).
- Infected ticks can live for two years without feeding. They pass the parasite while feeding.
- As many as 15 tick species are capable of carrying and transmitting the blood parasite responsible for causing equine piroplasmosis.

The United States has screened all imported horses for piroplasmosis for nearly 30 years. There is currently no vaccine available for equine piroplasmosis, and treatment generally is not effective against this tick-borne infection. To avoid the spread of the disease, it is important to eliminate contact with ticks and to prevent the transfer of blood from one equine animal to another. At this time, it is still unknown which species of tick is responsible for transmitting the infection on the South Texas ranch.

New Update:

Animal health authorities investigating an outbreak of equine piroplasmosis on a South Texas ranch have now located 317 positive horses. These horses include 288 on the index ranch, seven on other premises in Texas, one in Alabama, two in California, five in Florida, one in Georgia, five in Louisiana, one in Minnesota, two in North Carolina, three in New Jersey, one in Tennessee, and one in Wisconsin. All known positive horses are under quarantine, and testing of all epidemiologically linked horses is ongoing.

The information was released in a Nov. 13 report issued to the World Organization for Animal Health (Office International des Epizooties, or OIE) by John Clifford, DVM, deputy administrator of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Officials in the United States have screened all imported horses for piroplasmosis for nearly 30 years. The disease was officially eradicated from the United States in 1988. It is spread by as many as 15 species of ticks, the use of contaminated needles, and possibly through blood-contaminated semen of infected stallions.

As a result of the current investigation, Canada and several states have restricted the importation of horses from Texas. Bob Hillman, DVM, Texas' state veterinarian and head of the Texas Animal Health Commission, urged horse owners and veterinarians to check with animal health officials for any state of destination to ensure the animals have met all entry requirements.