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Consulting Services

Ownership and Management's Role in Farm Biosecurity

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I have several consulting clients in China and as you might imagine, there is a biosecurity revolution underway in that country. Suddenly everyone has become very serious about developing and building new and better biosecurity programs. All of those changes are welcome and positive, I couldn't be more pleased with the current efforts. I want to talk about another issue, however, and that is compliance. The best biosecurity program in the world with the most technologically advanced strategies and facilities will not be effective if employees and visitors don't comply with the policies...every single time. A good biosecurity program implemented 100% of the time is better than a perfect biosecurity program implemented 80% of the time. We often talk about setting expectations and holding employees accountable but what can farm owners and managers do to help ensure good compliance to biosecurity policies?

Clearly Communicate Policies:

If employees are going to implement a biosecurity program, they have to know what it is. This starts with a clear, written set of biosecurity standard operating procedures (SOPs) or best management practices (BMPs). These are the rules that must be followed and they must be explicitly clear in what steps must be followed. We must remember that some of our new employees don't have a farm or agricultural background and even if they do, they're often unfamiliar with basic biosecurity procedures.

Once the basic policies have been communicated, we must reinforce those policies with other communication tools such as signage and visual instructions. Visual depictions of showering procedures, for example, can be useful to reinforce and remind employees and visitors of proper procedures. Signs such as "do not enter", "no personal belongings" and "boot change required" are all useful tools to help make sure employees and visitors are constantly reminded about proper procedures.

Provide Adequate Training:

Once biosecurity procedures have been established, training must be provided to ensure understanding. For new employees, biosecurity training should be part of the onboarding and orientation procedure. A copy of the SOPs should be provided and a knowledgeable trainer should go through all procedures step by step making sure to provide ample opportunity for employees to ask questions.

Ongoing training should be provided for all employees. I recommend at least quarterly biosecurity training. This does not have to be extensive, a thirty-minute session on a new policy or a review of an existing policy is sufficient. The purpose of the on-going training is to reinforce the initial training and keep biosecurity at the top of employee's minds. This is also a good opportunity to ask employees for feedback on how biosecurity programs could be improved. If employees feel like they have input into the program, they are more likely to feel ownership of the program and compliance will improve dramatically when that is the case.

Lastly, a basic training program needs to be provided for all temporary visitors to the farm such as tour participants, contract workers, non-farm company employees etc. This program should explain expectations of visitors and any special rules that apply for people who don't routinely visit the farm such as visitor's logs and special restrictions such as not touching animals, not stepping into pens or the required use of a chaperone.

Provide Sufficient Equipment and Supplies:

This has become an area of particular frustration for me. If we expect employees and visitors to follow biosecurity procedures, we must provide sufficient equipment and supplies for them to do so. A common complaint that I get from visitors and employees alike is dirty shower facilities and a lack of clean, dry towels and clothing. Showers and shower areas should be cleaned and disinfected regularly, at least daily. Good quality, freshly laundered and dry towels should be provided as well as warm water and a comfortable temperature in the shower area. Clean, appropriately sized clothing should be provided and easily accessible to all employees and visitors. Special attention should be paid to underclothes including socks. I frequently see poor quality or no socks provided which makes it much more likely that someone will bring clothing across the clean dirty line in an effort to stay comfortable. Finally, good quality boots should be provided to all employees. Employees spend a lot of time on their feet and poor quality boots will negatively affect their comfort and ultimately, their performance.

Another common problem I see is insufficient supplies such as disposable boots, gloves, shampoo, soap, disinfectant and hand sanitizer. We cannot expect people to use these supplies if they're not readily available. Keep plenty of these supplies in inventory and develop a procedure to make sure they are restocked regularly.

Model Good Behavior and Strictly Enforce the Rules:

There is nothing more damaging to biosecurity than a supervisor or management employee that is observed not following proper biosecurity procedures. Biosecurity policies apply to everyone, regardless of their position in the company. Owners and senior managers should go out of their way to provide a good example to other employees by modeling good behavior and carefully complying with all biosecurity procedures. Talking about the importance of biosecurity is great, but showing employees it is important is even better.

It is equally important that employees understand the consequences of not following biosecurity procedures. Consequences of poor compliance should be clearly outlined in the SOPs and supervisors should fairly, but firmly enforce the rules and punish those that don't comply. Every farm manager/owner will have to decide what the appropriate punishments are for non-compliance but whatever is chosen, it must be implemented consistently.

When we think of biosecurity, we often think about facilities, policies and procedures. Many times, however, the break down in our systems is not with the design of the program but with compliance. Compliance with procedures has to be a major focus area and it is critical that owners and farm management do their part to encourage compliance on the part of employees, contractors and visitors to the farm.

About the Author:

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