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Branding and Food Safety

Springtime in Wyoming means branding season is in full swing. Livestock producers know there are many risks associated with working livestock and with branding, but most do not consider gastrointestinal illness as one of those risks.

Since 2001, the Wyoming Department of Health has received numerous reports of Campylobacteriosis among state residents due to the potential association between cattle handling, especially branding-related activities, and the Campylobacter jejuni bacteria.

Most commonly Campylobacteriosis is a food borne illness caused by eating undercooked or improperly handled raw poultry, drinking unpasteurized milk, handling infected household pets, drinking contaminated water or traveling abroad. This bacterial infection is the second leading cause of gastroenteritis in Wyoming and the most common cause of the illness in the United States.

The symptoms of the illness include bloody diarrhea, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, chills, muscle aches, fatigue and fever. Symptoms can occur anywhere from 2 to 5 days after exposure and usually last about one week, but can last up to several weeks.

The main means of exposure to the bacteria when handling livestock, especially during branding, is due to the significant contact with manure which is often in the form of scours. Although contact with manure is unavoidable there are precautions that can be taken to lessen the risk of exposure:

* Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after branding and before eating, drinking, chewing tobacco or gum, smoking, applying Chapstick[®] or touching your face;