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Cows felled by mystery ailment

After six years of scratching their heads in frustration, Mike and Linda Cherniske, owners of Gunnhill Dairy in Delta, say they know why their dairy cows are getting sick and dying. They say buried power lines from a plant eight miles away are stressing the cows.

Ever since he moved his herd from Connecticut to Delta six years ago, one question has dogged dairy farmer Mike Cherniske: Why were so many of his cows dying?

Cherniske, a fourth-generation dairy farmer, checked his animals' feed and water daily and kept their vaccinations current. Yet every day, it seemed, he found several more of his animals dead.

"It got so I began to doubt myself," Cherniske said. "An animal would come down with a minor ailment but none of the standard remedies would work. Then all of a sudden it was dead."

Cherniske soon discovered he was not alone. The same mystery plagued dozens of dairy farms in western Millard County. Try as they might, the area's veterinarians were unable to stem the losses.

Now, after years on the brink of bankruptcy, some Delta dairy farmers believe they know what is causing the deaths. They blame the loss of thousands of cows on electrical currents surging through the ground from the nearby Intermountain Power Project.

The Utah farmers, along with several California dairy operators whose farms are at the end of an IPP power transmission line, have filed a lawsuit in the Superior Court of California in Los Angeles against the Intermountain Power Agency, the IPP's operator, and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, which takes nearly 45 percent of the electricity generated by the massive coal-fired facility.

They contend faulty design of the plant is causing unwanted electricity to stray into the ground and aquifers beneath their farms. That electricity, they contend, is compromising their animals' immune systems.

The farmers seek at least \$100 million in damages.

"This lawsuit is really the last step for the farmers," said Suzelle M. Smith, a Los Angeles attorney representing the farmers. "They tried talking [to the companies], but no one would listen. Now their hearts are broken and the problem has got to be fixed."

Dairy farmers expect a small number of their animals to die each year -- anywhere from 2 percent to 5 percent, Cherniske said. "But my losses are above 20 percent and some other farmers within a 10-mile radius of the plant have losses five to 10 times the national average."

Cherniske, who runs a herd of approximately 1,200 milk cows, said he was as perplexed as anyone by the mysterious ailments until February 2002, when things unexpectedly got better on his farm.

His hospital barn, normally full, was suddenly empty. "I asked the vet what was going on and he didn't have an answer," he said. "Then I heard that one of the turbines was shut down at the plant. But not a week after they turned the turbine back on the problems returned."

An expert brought in to test for stray voltage found Cherniske's and other Delta-area farms alive with direct current -- the type of electricity the IPP transmits over power lines to the Los Angeles area.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, however, does not believe its power plant is causing the problems, spokesman Eric Tharp said.

"We've conducted some tests of our own and haven't found anything wrong," he said. "We [the IPP] don't supply those farms with power, so if there is a problem it may be with the wiring at the dairies."

But the dairies, like all the homes and businesses in Utah, run on alternating current. And Cherniske said he spent \$45,000 to isolate his farm from the power grid. He still found direct current voltage in the water troughs and other areas.

"There is no source for the direct current power except IPP," Smith said.

USU Extension Service veterinarian Crell Bagley said cows can be sensitive to electricity and some studies suggest that stray voltage can cause problems similar to those the Delta and California dairy farmers complain about.

He noted, however, that those studies involved cows affected by alternating current produced by equipment, such as milking machines, that was not grounded properly.

Still, most of the evidence that suggests cows may be affected by high tension power lines is anecdotal at best, said Bill Mies, an executive with eMerge Interactive, a Sebastian, Fla.-based firm that provides food safety, individual animal health tracking and supply procurement services to the beef cattle industry.

"There is nothing magical about a cow," Mies said. "If that electricity was affecting cows, you also expect that they would be finding an unusually large number of deer, coyotes and rabbits dead in the area. And if that electricity is enough to kill a 1,000-pound cow, a 150-pound man would not seem to have much of a chance either."

Dairy farmers John and Maria Nye, who have about 1,400 milk cows, say they have explored

all potential causes and "this is what we are ending up at," Maria Nye said.

She added no one wishes IPP harm. "We have this problem that needs to be fixed. It would be nice if we didn't have dead cows."

Delta attorney Warren Peterson, who serves as local counsel for the dairy farmers, noted the dispute is pitting two of Millard County's largest industries and employers against one another.

"It is really unfortunate. We have two of our most important industries involved and we need both of them. But it looks like we're getting a byproduct from one affecting the other."

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