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Pigeon Fever

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The name "pigeon fever" comes from the appearance of the horses infected with the Corynebacterium Pseudo-tuberculosis bacteria, which develops abscesses in the chest that become enlarged like a pigeon's chest. Other names you may hear when describing this disease are dryland strangles, dysland distemper, or caseous lympadenitis (goats). Historically the disease has primarily been seen in dry, hot areas of the country (more commonly in Western states), but in recent years has moved Eastward. 2013 is the first year that South Carolina resident horses have been diagnosed with "pigeon fever" infections. The movement across the United States is attributed to ideal weather conditions and interstate movement of horses that are carrying the infectious bacteria. The bacteria survives in the soil and spreads to horses primarily through open wounds or flies. This disease is typically not life threatening but can causes large swelling, discomfort, and sometimes fever. Please note that pigeons, birds, or any poultry are NOT involved with this disease or cause spread of the infectious bacteria.

Clinical Signs

A horse that is infected with the bacteria that causes "pigeon fever" most commonly develops swelling of the chest and lower abdomen. The swellings on the chest and abdomen are secondary to abscesses developing under the skin. Some horses will also have abscesses in the mammary gland, sheath, and legs. Some horses will show evidence of discomfort, become lethargic, have a decreased appetite, and run fever. A small percentage of horses (less than 3%) of infected horses will develop internal abscesses in the chest or abdomen that may interfere with internal organs.

Transmission

Pigeons, birds, and poultry do NOT spread this disease, become infected, or have any role in the transmission of this disease. The name "pigeon fever" is due to the pigeon breasted appearance secondary to abscesses in the horse's chest. The bacteria, Corynebacterium Pseudotuberculosis, can live in the soil for months to years even in direct sunlight. Most commonly cases occur in the dry months (fall and winter). Infection appears to be associated with biting insects and flies. Flies will often land on an open wound and move the bacteria to an unexposed horses by biting, abrasions, or mucous membranes. Humans and other forms of contact with infectious bacteria or infected horses (open wounds) allows for the spread to healthy horses. Once exposed to the bacteria, a horse may or may not develop the characteristic abscesses, and there appears to be variance between horses whether they become sick or not. Of those that do become sick with "pigeon fever" it may be weeks to months before you see any evidence of sickness.

Diagnosis

Most horses can be diagnosed with the disease based on the clinical signs of swollen chest with abscess. If further confirmation is desired a culture of the organism from an abscess or draining wound is a definitive diagnosis. A blood sample can also be submitted to determine if a horse is infected. The blood sample may vary in results based on how long the horse has been infected and the severity of the infection.

Summary

Although, "pigeon fever" is not new disease to the United States horse industry, it is new to the SC horse industry and should be managed appropriately. If you suspect your horse has been exposed or is showing signs of "pigeon fever" please contact your veterinarian immediately to determine the best treatment and plan for prevention of spread to other horses. Pigeon Fever is not listed as a reportable disease in South Carolina, however, because it is new to the SC horse industry, the State Veterinarian's office recommends that proper management of infected premises be implemented including isolation of affected animals, fly control, disposal of purulent material including contaminated bedding and other general bio-security measures.

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