Louisiana cattlemen have two years to upgrade the status of state herds in the national bovine brucellosis eradication program or face additional restrictions on the interstate movement of their animals.

According to veterinarian Dr. Steve Nicholson of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, Louisiana is one of four states or areas with Class C status, which indicates the highest incidence and risk of the infectious disease of cattle and other warm-blooded animals, including man. Also in the class are Arkansas and parts of Florida and Texas.

All states must be upgraded to Class B by October 1988 or have more restrictions placed on the movement of cattle in interstate commerce, he adds.

As part of a nationwide effort to control and eradicate brucellosis, also known as Bang's disease, USDA regulations impose various requirements and restrictions on the interstate shipment of cattle.

The USDA rates and designated states and areas as "brucellosis free" if the disease has not been detected within the past 12 months. States with reported cases are rated Class A, B or C levels. State designated as Class A have very little incidence and risk of the disease, while those in Class B are considered having moderate levels.

Louisiana has some 700 brucellosis quarantined herds, of which around 550 are known to be infected. They are in the testing program. Another 150 herds have not been tested.

"Quarantined herds must be reduced to 375 by the 1988 deadline or federal restrictions will tighten and many states will not accept shipment of cattle from Louisiana," says Nicholson. Brucellosis has serious effects on the animal reproduction, he says. Symptoms include abortion late in pregnancy, retained after-birth and infertility. A high rate of infertility may occur when breeding herds are first exposed.

In later years, infected cows frequently are infertile and many which calve retain the placenta. Abortions occur mainly in heifers or susceptible replacement cows. "It is difficult for an infected herd to produce a profit," says Nicholson, adding that the disease also is a threat to those who handle raw meat or milk from infected animals. It is particularly dangerous to people who work around infected cows at calving.

A recent amendment to brucellosis regulations by the USDA, effective Oct. 12, is aimed at preventing further interstate spread of the disease and to improve enforcement procedures. State regulations already enforce vaccination requirements, and the USDA changes will make them enforceable under federal regulations.

Under the changes, female dairy cattle born after Jan. 1, 1984, and four months or older, have to be vaccinated for brucellosis to be moved in or out of Class B states or areas.

Also, female dairy or beef cattle born after Jan. 1, 1984, and four months or older, have to be vaccinated for brucellosis to be moved in or out of Class C states or areas.

The USDA amendments do not require vaccinations of these categories of cattle if the animals are moved directly to slaughter or to a quarantined feedlot in Class B states or areas.

Another change requires stockyards approved to handle brucellosis-infected cattle in interstate shipment to have holding facilities with floors made of an impervious material as a cleanup and sanitation aid to help reduce spread of the disease.

One other change establishes procedures for movement of cattle that do not meet testing or vaccination requirements for further shipment. These animals can be moved directly to slaughter or a quarantined feedlot, or can be returned under permit in a sealed vehicle to the state of origin.

The amendments were recommended to the USDA by the U.S. Animal Health Association, whose members represent major segments of the livestock industry, including state and federal animal health officials.