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WORLD NEWS

Case of Mad Cow Found In the U.S. for First Time

**Discovery Expected to Jolt
American Cattle Industry;
Food Supply Called Safe**

Federal officials announced they have found the first case of suspected mad-cow disease in the U.S. and are trying to track down meat from the afflicted animal before it reaches consumers.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said a single Holstein dairy cow from a farm in Washington state tested presumptively positive for the fatal brain-wasting disease in recent days.

By **Scott Kilman** in Iowa City, Iowa, **Shirley Leung** in Chicago and **Tamsin Carlisle** in Calgary, Alberta

A sample of nervous-system tissue from the animal was collected by meat inspectors when it arrived at a small processor in Washington state Dec. 9 because the cow appeared to be suffering from a neurological disorder.

The health implications of the finding are minimal, experts say, but the economic implications are substantial for the U.S. cattle industry, which is the single largest part of the American agriculture sector. U.S. consumers spend more than \$50 billion on beef annually and the cattle industry generates about \$180 billion in economic activity, which includes the money ranchers spend on their business and their impact on Great Plains economy.

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Not only will the food and restaurant industries have to deal with consumer fear of eating beef -- a fear that depressed European beef sales for years -- but U.S. trade partners are expected to swiftly ban imports of U.S. beef. Indeed, several nations, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore, and

Taiwan, [halted U.S. beef imports](#)¹ just hours after the announcement.

"We would hope they will base their decisions on science and look at this as a very low risk for them," said Chandler Keys, a spokesman for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a trade group representing U.S. ranchers, referring to the big trading partners. But he added: "their modus operandi up until now would show there might be some disruption, but we're going to work on that."

The U.S. itself banned Canadian beef last May after a single Alberta beef cow tested positive for mad-cow disease. The finding of that lone case has devastated the Canadian cattle industry, which only now is beginning to export beef again. Exports represent a larger percentage of beef sales in Canada than in the U.S., where exports account for about 10% of annual sales.

MAD-COW DISEASE

- Read [a transcript](#)² of the USDA briefing on the discovery of mad-cow disease in the U.S.
- [Countries Move to Ban U.S. Beef](#)³

Consumption of infected meat is thought to cause the rare, human form of the disease, which is called new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. The human form of the disease has been linked to about 140 deaths, mostly in Britain and Europe. Scientists don't think the milk of an infected dairy cow can carry mad-cow disease.

The news of the sick cow comes at time when many U.S. consumers have rediscovered an appetite for beef, thanks in part to the high-protein diet fad and the push by meat giants to make beef more convenient for consumers. That growing demand, as well as a shortage of Canadian beef, has helped to push U.S. cattle prices to record levels.

Cattle prices are likely to fall so hard Wednesday in the futures contract trading pits at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange that U.S. financial regulators are stepping up their oversight of those markets to ensure orderly trading. The Chicago Mercantile Exchange said it intends to keep both the live cattle and feeder cattle futures pits open for business Wednesday and Friday.

"The Commission will be stepping up its surveillance of these markets over the coming days to guard against any activity of a potentially manipulative nature," said a statement released Tuesday night by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, which regulates futures trading.

The biggest problem for the cattle and food industries is that it will likely take regulators several months to figure out whether the cow, which lived on a farm near Mabton, Wash., is the tip of a widespread outbreak or a rare example of a spontaneous, isolated case. According to a 2003 count, Washington state had 1.1 million head of cattle, about 1% of the 96.1 million cattle in the U.S. as a whole, the USDA said.

Inspectors allowed meat from the animal to be shipped to distributors, including a company identified by the USDA as Midway Meats, but the nervous-system tissue was destroyed. The nervous-system tissue of cattle is what carries the infectious agent that causes mad-cow disease, whose scientific name is bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE.

"We remain confident in the safety of our food supply," Ms. Veneman said.

Federal authorities are scrambling to figure out how the Mabton cow was exposed to the infectious agent, and whether other cattle were exposed, too. The government has imposed a quarantine on the Mabton farm and authorities are trying to trace meat from other animals in the herd for testing.

McDonald's Corp., the world's largest restaurant company, and **Burger King Corp.**, the nation's no. 2 burger chain, said Tuesday night they don't use the meat suppliers associated with the diseased cow.

A sample of the cow was tested at a federal laboratory in Ames, Iowa, and samples are being tested for confirmation at a laboratory in the United Kingdom, where mad-cow disease ravaged cattle herds in the 1980s, and has since spread to 23 countries. The U.S. would be the 24th.

Regulators face a huge disadvantage in tracing animals because the U.S. doesn't have a national identification system for cattle, a system that Canadian officials relied upon heavily to track down and test the cattle that came in contact with their infected animal. U.S. ranchers have resisted such a system in part because they fear that liability for a food safety problem might end up on their doorstep.

Cattle in the U.S. often change hands many times, making them hard to trace. However, one segment of the cattle industry where farmers tend to keep extensive records of their animals are dairy producers. U.S. officials didn't provide any information last night about their ability to track other cattle that were exposed to the Mabton cow.

The way most cattle have contracted mad-cow disease is by eating feed contaminated with the remains of another infected cow. The practice of using the waste remains of ruminants to increase the protein level of cattle rations was widespread in Britain in the 1980s, and it allowed the malady -- which otherwise isn't contagious -- to spread.

The U.S. banned the use of cattle remains in cattle rations in 1997 in hopes of building a firewall in the event mad-cow ever came to the U.S. However, not all U.S. feed mills have complied completely with the ban.

The proximity of the Washington state farm to Canada is also likely to raise questions about whether the source of the mad-cow case in Alberta -- itself still something of a mystery -- is somehow connected to the U.S. case.

The Canadian discovery increased the chance that mad-cow would be found in a U.S. animal. A lot of cattle have moved back and forth across the border with Canada.

Since the late 1980s, the U.S. government has taken several steps to try to keep BSE out of the country, and to limit its spread if it ever did arrive. In addition to the feed ban, the government annually tests about 20,000 cattle that are at the highest risk of carrying the ailment, such as cattle that show up at a meatpacking plant unable to stand or walk, which apparently was the case with the Mabton cow.

Studies commissioned by the USDA over the years have concluded that, because of these steps, any outbreak of mad-cow disease in the U.S. would likely be very small, and nothing on the scale of the

calamity that swept Britain, where hundreds of thousands of cattle became victims.

A Harvard School of Public Health research team concluded in 2001 that no serious public health crisis would ensue even if 500 infected cows entered the American cattle herd. The researchers concluded in a report prepared on behalf of the USDA that feeding bans imposed by the U.S. and other countries in the wake of Britain's mad cow outbreak would prevent the disease from taking hold and spreading. The researchers said they took into account incomplete compliance with the feeding ban.

Still, U.S. critics have long complained that too few of the nation's 96 million cattle are screened for the disease and that the government could build a stronger firewall by, among other things, banning the use of ruminant material in any feed for any livestock, eliminating the chance of mistakes.

The U.S. government has taken the steps it has in part because of the fear that U.S. beef would be banned from export markets for several years if just one case of mad cow were detected in the U.S. Indeed, after the Canada case brought the disease to North America, the Bush administration began lobbying for the International Office of Epizootics to consider how to shorten the time in which a country hit by an isolated case of mad cow disease can resume exporting beef. The Paris-based group sets animal disease control standards for its 164 member nations.

A lot still isn't know about mad-cow disease, but most scientists believe it is carried in the central nervous system of older cattle. As a result, the U.S. has been slowly permitting back into the country Canadian beef products unlikely to have this material, such as boneless meat from cattle under the age of 30 months, and boneless veal from calves under the age of 37 weeks. The U.S. has yet to allow live cattle from Canada into the U.S., however.

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