

December 26, 2003

MAD COW HITS THE U.S.

Cattlemen's Association Aims To Try to Control the Debate

By **AMY MERRICK**

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Terry Stokes was finishing paperwork Tuesday afternoon when he heard the news that set in motion the most rehearsed plan in the history of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

"There's been a presumptive positive identified at a dairy farm in Washington State," Mr. Stokes told an emergency meeting of about two dozen staff members at the association's headquarters in Centennial, Colo. A similar meeting took place at its offices in Washington, D.C.

No further explanation or instruction was needed. Mr. Stokes, the association's chief executive, and his colleagues went to work. Their goal: Control the debate.

MAD COW HITS THE U.S.



1

See [full coverage](#)² of the first case of mad-cow disease in the U.S.

The aggressive response reflects a lesson learned from Britain, where government officials stood accused of initially hiding an epidemic that eventually killed 137 Britons who had consumed infected cattle. Distrustful British consumers turned away from beef, leading to a sharp drop in consumption. Other nations spurned

exported British beef.

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com. • [See a sample reprint in PDF format](#) • [Order a reprint of this article now](#).

The discovery of the Washington state cow also triggered long-rehearsed plans at other organizations, like the U.S. Department of Agriculture and **McDonald's** Corp. The National Restaurant Association "has been working since 1990 to prepare for this day," said Steven Grover, the association's vice

president of health and safety regulatory affairs.

The beef association followed a Tuesday Agriculture Department news conference with one of its own. Speaking to 144 reporters and other participants, Mr. Stokes and his colleagues delivered messages they had written long ago: The U.S. beef supply is the safest in the world. Consumers shouldn't be afraid to eat meat because the infected material from the cow wouldn't enter the food supply. The discovery of this case actually shows that the government surveillance system works.

In the first 24 hours after the news broke, Mr. Stokes estimates, he and his team gave more than 100 interviews.

They also updated and touted the association's mad-cow Web site, www.bseinfo.org³. Sober and unemotional, the site explains how cattle contract bovine spongiform encephalopathy, otherwise known as mad-cow disease, and posts research from scientific journals. The association is hoping that the academic tone of the site, featuring studies conducted by the likes of Harvard University, will give it credibility.

Still, a policy of openness at the association hasn't entirely kept things calm. By late Wednesday, reporters' questions to Mr. Stokes and his colleagues became more contentious, especially as the nation's trading partners imposed bans on the importation of U.S. beef.

Even among Mr. Stokes's ranks, the commitment to stay positive began to break down. Responding to a question from a reporter, Chandler Keys, the association's vice president of public policy, lashed out at television stations broadcasting images of ill or downed cattle. "That B-roll [or background footage] that we're watching is from England," he said angrily. "Those are not U.S. animals. That is B-roll from the epidemic -- and I stress the word epidemic -- that the Europeans found themselves in."

He said he urged CNN to broadcast footage of healthy American cattle instead of afflicted British cattle.

Mr. Stokes tried to steer the call back to his message. "The system we've developed over a number of years to address issues such as this works, and consumers of U.S. beef can continue to be confident that they have the safest beef in the world," he repeated for the third time in an hour.

Mr. Stokes, a 49-year-old rancher who has been the beef association's chief executive since March 2002, says the days ahead will reveal whether the association's message has been effective. The group will work with a market-research firm to survey American reaction to the news. Staff members also are monitoring the tone of questions e-mailed to the new Web site.

If people seem frightened, the cattlemen's association will send out more messages-whatever it takes to convince Americans that the beef supply is safe.

Write to Amy Merrick at amy.merrick@wsj.com⁴

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB107239614856817800,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

- (1) http://online.wsj.com/page/0,,2_1059,00.html
- (2) http://online.wsj.com/page/0,,2_1059,00.html
- (3) <http://www.bseinfo.org>
- (4) <mailto:amy.merrick@wsj.com>

Updated December 26, 2003

Copyright 2003 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our **Subscriber Agreement** and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones

Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.