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FDA May Strengthen Animal-Feed Rules Because Of Mad Cow

By OTESA MIDDLETON

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WASHINGTON -- The Food and Drug Administration will wait for final test results on the country's first possible case of mad-cow disease to determine if it needs stronger rules to prevent spread of the disease.

By Monday, the FDA expects a lab in England to finish the third and final test on samples from a Washington-state cow thought to have the deadly disease.

The agency will then determine if it needs changes in its rules for what cows can eat.

Several hundred FDA employees will work through Christmas on this issue.

"It is very early in the investigation and it's not time to change anything at this point," Dr. Lester Crawford, the FDA's deputy commissioner, said in an interview with Dow Jones Newswires Wednesday.

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The frenzy began Tuesday when the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the first U.S. case of mad-cow disease in a paralyzed cow near Yakima, Wash. The cow tested positive through two different techniques and results from a third, confirmation test, are expected by Monday.

Once the results are in, the FDA will tell the public if it will keep its current feed rules in place or make "some small changes," Crawford said. "We have to reserve judgment until there is confirmation."

If mad-cow disease is confirmed, Crawford said the feed the animal ate is likely to blame.

Animal feed is the cause in all of the mad-cow disease cases in other countries, where the source of the disease was determined, Crawford said.

"We believe we'll be able to trace this one," he said, though "that's not guaranteed."

Since 1997, the FDA has banned feeding cattle, sheep and goats any foods containing cattle, sheep and goat products. This is to prevent the spread of the disease if any infected animals are in the food chain.

"We have virtually 100% compliance after six years of enforcing it," Crawford said.

Verns Moses Lake Meats of Moses Lake, Wash., recalled 10,410 pounds of raw beef as a result of the mad-cow disease finding. The company said the meat may have come in contact with tissues from the diseased animal on Dec. 9, when the meat was sent to several processing plants. USDA said there is low risk to the public health.

Mad-cow disease, officially called bovine spongiform encephalopathy, kills all of its victims. The disease, first spotted in Europe, causes sponge-like holes to form in the brain and the disease is thought to spread to humans who eat contaminated beef. Symptoms in humans include hallucinations, poor muscle coordination and problems with hearing, seeing and smelling. Most stricken with the disease die a year after the first symptoms.

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