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Ore Distributor Holds Beef Shipment; Wash Co Recalls Beef

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP)--The discovery of the first suspected U.S. case of mad cow disease in Washington state has caused federal inspectors to instruct at least one Oregon meat distributor to hold its beef shipments. Also late Tuesday, a Washington meat company voluntarily recalled more than 10,000 pounds of raw beef.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that Vern's Moses Lake Meat Co., in Moses Lake, Wash., had voluntarily recalled 10,410 pounds of raw beef that may have been exposed to tissues containing the infectious agent. The Moses Lake establishment is one of several that may have received the meat, officials said.

The Oregon distributor said that even though authorities have yet to determine if meat from the contaminated cow was shipped to Oregon, "It's not going any place. We'll do what we have to do to keep the product from being distributed," said an employee at the Willamette Valley Meat Company in Portland, who confirmed that inspectors had visited the meat facility earlier in the day.

A single Holstein cow, which couldn't move on its own, was found at a farm near Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima earlier this month. It tested preliminarily positive for the brain-wasting illness, said U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman.

Beef experts stress that because the disease is limited to the nervous system, contamination of other meat products is unlikely.

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But even the suggestion of contamination brought TV cameras to the meat distributor's doorstep in southeast Portland. Floodlights poured onto the pavement outside and employees inside the warehouse kept the blinds closed.

They peered out, then opened the door a crack to address reporters. They asked not to be named, even as image's of the company's logo - which consists of a snowy Mount Hood above the words "Serving the West with Quality Meat" - flashed on the evening news.

Bruce Pokarney, spokesman for the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said he hadn't been informed of an Oregon connection.

But Dan Puzo, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, said the meat is being checked. "We're in the process of determining the extent of the recall - so whether they might have any of the implicated product is not yet known."

The beef industry took comfort in the fact that only one cow is suspected to have the ailment - not a herd.

Because the case appears to be isolated, said Greg Smith, an Oregon lawmaker who also serves as executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, the beef supply is most likely safe.

Baker City rancher Dan Warnock, a member of the Beef Council's board of directors, told The Oregonian the industry will be impacted, however. "It'll darn sure be devastating," Warnock said.

The official at the Willamette Valley Meat Company said that the scare would hurt business. "Any time there's a recall, business takes a hit," he said. "All the steps are being followed that can be followed," said the spokesman. "We have no further comment at this time."

USDA officials said the beef being recalled was produced on Dec. 9 and shipped to several establishments for further processing and is being recalled "out of an abundance of caution" even though it "would not be expected to be infected or have an adverse public health impact."

The department's Food Safety and Inspection Service said it is continuing its investigation to ensure that all the recalled beef is correctly identified and tracked, but gave no further details immediately.

There was no answer at the telephone number listed for Vern's Moses Lake Meat Co., after the recall, which was announced in the wee hours of the morning Wednesday.

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