

December 25, 2003 11:29 p.m. EST

MAD COW HITS THE U.S.

So Far, at Least, Consumers See Discovery as Isolated Case

By **CHRISTOPHER WINDHAM, ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO and ELLEN BYRON**
Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Shoppers and food professionals appear to be showing only minimal concern about the first case of suspected mad-cow disease in the U.S., although that may quickly change if the problem becomes widespread.

Federal officials earlier this week disclosed that a dairy cow in Washington state tested presumptively positive for the brain-wasting illness. Laboratory pathologists in Britain Thursday confirmed those results from a sample sent them by the U.S. government.

So far, it appears business as usual for many preparing meals during the busy holiday season. "It hasn't changed my beef consumption," said Helen Speck, a retired public-affairs worker, shopping at a Gristede's store in lower Manhattan. Ms. Speck said she would stop eating beef only if the disease becomes widespread. "This is just one separate case," she noted.

Tom Collins, a facilities worker, also said the mad-cow discovery won't affect him. "I like beef," said Mr. Collins, who is originally from Ireland. "It happened in Europe and I'm still alive. I'm going to have beef tonight."

MAD COW HITS THE U.S.



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

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

The beef industry has been enjoying good times as of late. American consumers have been willing to pay more for beef, thanks in part to an improving economy and to the recent craze for high-protein diets, such as the Atkins diet. "Prices have escalated dramatically since early fall," noted Dan Murphy, a vice president of public affairs for the American Meat Institute, an Arlington, Va., trade association that represents the packers and processors of 95% of all American beef, pork, turkey, veal and lamb.

Attorney Tom Janson, a resident of St. Joseph, Minn., said he was in Europe in early 2001, just as several countries

article or visit: www.djreprints.com. • [See a sample reprint in PDF format](#) • [Order a reprint of this article now](#).

were grappling with newly discovered cases of the disease among their herds. Mad-cow disease was first confirmed in Britain in 1986 and spread through Europe, decimating the European beef industry. During that trip, Mr. Janson completely avoided beef. "Depending on what happens

here, I can see myself doing the exact same thing," he added. He and his wife may also begin buying organic beef from local farmers, instead of at a grocery store.

Sheila Jones, who runs a catering business in Hastings, Minn., said none of her clients have called to express concern. Still she is now considering ordering her beef from a local farmer, especially for the beef in one of the most popular items on her catering menu: dill meatballs in a mushroom-sour cream sauce. Mad-cow disease hasn't affected the menu for her family's holiday meal, either. Ms. Jones will be serving pheasant, goose and chicken, just like years past.

At specialty food retailer Central Market in Houston, which has a large beef section, consumers were knowledgeable about the problem but expressed confidence that there are adequate safeguards in Texas. In a brief survey of 10 shoppers, only one expressed worry, saying he was going to adjust his buying patterns while he saw how the issue developed. Dr. Saxon Borden, who practices general medicine, was carrying home a pork roast for Christmas.

Business at the store, a unit of privately held H.E. Butt Grocery, based in San Antonio, was strong. "Sales of meat are better than they have ever been for Christmas," said Pat Brown, general manager of the Houston Central Market store. "There is no reaction whatsoever. Nobody has even asked questions about it." Workers in the meat department echoed his remarks. Added shopper Will Brinegar, a travel agent: "You can't keep me away from his beef." Mr. Brinegar was carrying home a beef tenderloin.

Of course, not everyone is quite so sanguine. Phil Feinstein, who owns a liquor store in Hoboken, N.J., said that every Christmas Eve, he and his family open presents and then eat a midnight dinner centered around baked meatballs. This year, his wife, unsettled about the report of a case of mad-cow disease, nixed the traditional meatballs and -- to his dismay -- said they'd go instead with a cheese platter.

Phil, for his part, has no problem with the idea of eating beef, and says his wife probably would serve it to him, but just doesn't want to risk anything with their two young sons.

Some people say they had already changed their beef-buying habits, for other reasons. Concerns over growth hormones led Jeff Albertson, a manager of a commercial insurance agency's underwriting department, to begin buying his beef from a co-worker who raises a small herd of cattle as a side business. Mr. Albertson, a resident of West Des Moines, Iowa, said that knowing who raises the beef his family eats three to four times a week makes him feel more secure. "It makes me feel a lot better knowing that the meat is getting processed at a small locker," he said.

At Gorat's Steak House in Omaha, Neb., which buys most of its beef locally, it's business as usual unless the disease spreads. "We like our steak and potatoes in the Midwest, so unless the situation widens, it won't affect us," said Brian Jurgens, day chef at Gorat's, a favorite of Warren Buffett's.

Mr. Jurgens typically buys 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of beef every Monday. Prices have spiked since October, with a pound of tenderloin jumping from \$6 to \$10.50 a pound, although Mr. Jurgens said the cattle report he listened to on Wednesday morning indicated beef prices were down. "A lot of things remain to be determined," he said.

--Brian Steinberg contributed to this article.

Write to Christopher Windham at christopher.windham@wsj.com³, Alexei Barrionuevo at alexei.barrionuevo@wsj.com⁴ and Ellen Byron at ellen.byron@wsj.com⁵

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB107239601530824700,00.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) <mailto:christopher.windham@wsj.com>
- (4) <mailto:alexei.barrionuevo@wsj.com>
- (5) <mailto:ellen.byron@wsj.com>

Updated December 25, 2003 11:29 p.m.

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.