



December 25, 2003 3:37 p.m. EST

## WORLD NEWS

# Text of Briefing on Discovery Of Mad Cow Disease in U.S.

*Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, Undersecretary of Agriculture Elsa Murano and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Deputy Administrator Dr. Ron Dehaven at a news conference on Tuesday:*

**VENEMAN:** Today we received word from USDA's National Veterinary Services Laboratories in Ames, Iowa, that a single Holstein cow from Washington state has tested as presumptive positive for BSE, or what is widely known as Mad Cow Disease.

Despite this finding, we remain confident in the safety of our food supply. The risk to human health from BSE is extremely low.

The animal tested was a downer cow, or non-ambulatory at the time of slaughter, and was identified as part of USDA's targeted surveillance program.

The sample was taken on Dec. 9. It was tested and retested at our Ames facility using two tests, including immunohistochemistry, which is recognized as the, quote, "gold standard for the detection of BSE," by the World Health Organization and OIE, the Organization of International Epizootics.

---

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

---

A sample from this animal is being flown on a military aircraft to the central veterinary laboratory in Weybridge, England, in order to confirm this finding.

Our trace-back indicates that the animal comes from a farm in Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima, Wash. As part of our response plan, that farm has been quarantined.

After the animal was slaughtered, meat was sent for processing to Midway Meats in Washington State.

USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service is working quickly to accurately determine the final disposition of the products from the animal.

Even though the risk to human health is minimal, based on current evidence, we will take all appropriate actions out of an abundance of caution.

Since 1990, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has had an aggressive surveillance program in place to ensure detection and a swift response in the event of the introduction of BSE in this country.

As part of that program, we developed a response plan to be used if BSE is identified in the United States.

While this is a presumptive finding, we have activated that response plan today. We are making the appropriate notifications and confirmations under the plan, and start-up activities are beginning.

I have been in contact with [Homeland Security] Secretary [Tom] Ridge. And I would emphasize that, based on the information available, this incident is not terrorist related, nor is it related in any way to our nation's heightened-alert status. I cannot stress this point strongly enough.

The safety of our food supply and public health are high priorities of this administration and high priorities of USDA.

In the last year, we have tested 20,526 head of cattle for BSE, which is triple the level of the previous year of 2002.

The presumptive positive today is a result of our aggressive surveillance program. This is a clear indication that our surveillance-and-detection program is working.

USDA has been training and planning for several years in case this situation presented itself. We continue to protect the U.S. food supply and the public health and safeguard American agriculture.

In October, we announced findings from the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis that found that even if an infected animal were introduced into the U.S. animal agriculture system, the risk of spreading is low based on the safeguards and controls we have already put in place.

As part of our response to this situation, we will provide daily briefings to update the public on the status.

We will continue to provide you all of the information that we possibly can, and do so as quickly as possible.

We have released this finding even before final confirmation in the U.K. because of our confidence in the testing that has already been carried out and in the interest of protecting the food supply and public health.

Information is available on our Web site at [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)<sup>1</sup>, and we will be updating that information frequently.

We will also have regularly recorded updates for you. You may call a toll-free number, (1-866-4USDACOM).

While this incident would represent the first finding of BSE in the United States, we have worked hard to ensure that our response is swift and effective.

We will continue to work with partners, such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Homeland Security, to protect our food supply and the public health.

At this time of year, many Americans are making plans for the holidays and for food. We see no need for people to alter those plans or their eating habits or to do anything but have a happy and healthy holiday season.

I plan to serve beef for my Christmas dinner. And we remain confident in the safety of our food supply.

I want to thank you all again for being here on this late hour and on such short notice, but we did feel it was important to update you on this important situation.

Thank you.

And we'll be glad to take your questions.

**QUESTION:** Is there any connection with this finding to the incident in Alberta, Canada; that perhaps that cow came down from Canada in any way?

**VENEMAN:** It is way too early to tell, but I would think that the situation of trying to put those two incidents together would be doubtful, primarily because they're different kinds of animals. This was a Holstein cow.

**QUESTION:** Have you alerted any of your trading partners to this incident? And if so, have any countries taken action against -- closed their borders to U.S. beef exports?

**VENEMAN:** Again, it's very early. We are in the process of notifying a whole range of people at this point, including our trading partners. And I can't at this point anticipate what they may do in response to this announcement.

**QUESTION:** What steps, if any, are you specifically taking to prevent the spread of this disease? And what assurances do we have that other beef is not contaminated?

**VENEMAN:** Well, I think it's very important to recognize that this disease does not spread easily.

One of the things that people are very confused about -- and I found it as we went through the situation when Canada had a single case of BSE -- is a lot of times people don't understand that this is not foot-and-mouth disease. It's not that highly contagious disease that you often see spread so quickly as you did in the U.K. at the beginning of 2001. So it's important to make that distinction.

We have been taking steps since 1990 to protect our beef supply from this disease. We implemented a feed ban. We have required the removal of any kind of risk materials from an animal like this one, a downer animal. And we have a whole series of actions that have been taken to reduce substantially the risk to public health from this disease if it ever were found.

And that's why we continue to believe that this finding, while unfortunate, does not pose any kind of significant risk to the human food chain.

**QUESTION:** Can you tell us who this will affect and what the chances are that it could become more widespread here in the U.S.?

**VENEMAN:** Well, I think at this point it's hard to tell. But again, the unfortunate find of a single case in Canada earlier this year gave us some experience of the type of investigation that we now have to do.

We did not know when the Canada investigation started whether or not there would be more cases or whether or not it would be an isolated case. Indeed, after several months of checking into the situation, it turned out to be an isolated case. It is too early at this point to say whether or not this will be an isolated case.

What I can tell you that we're doing is that we're going back to the farm where this cow came from, we will be doing a complete investigation on-farm and tracing the animal back to its origins.

**QUESTION:** Can you tell us a little bit more about this particular farm? What do you plan to do about the other animals? You said it was quarantined. Are you going to test the other cows there?

And also, how concerned are you that the public outcry from people here on the street when they hear "mad cow," there could be some sort of hysteria associated with that? How concerned are you about that? And certainly you must agree that it's a possibility, are you not?

**VENEMAN:** Well, I would certainly hope that people will remain confident in the food supply. As I said, we in some ways had some experience with this because of the one find in Canada. What we found, because of the actions that were taken both in Canada and in the United States with the case earlier this year, is that demand for beef did not diminish, partly because we believe that people in North America know that we have the strongest food-safety systems in the world; we have the protections in place. And again, I personally do not hesitate to recommend to anyone that beef is absolutely safe to eat.

As to the farm, your other question. Again, we're in the very early stages of the investigation. We have a complete book of protocols that we're following with regard to how we would deal if we ever had an outbreak of BSE. We're following all of those steps, including we've already located the farm and that

farm will be quarantined and the investigation will begin.

Again, this was very recent breaking news, so we're taking all steps that we can. And we will be continuing to update you as we indicated.

**QUESTION:** Could you give us some sense of narrative about the farm? Why was this particular farm being studied? Was this animal significant in some way, that you did tests on this animal? How many other animals were there on this farm? How many other farms are approximate to this farm?

**VENEMAN:** First of all, the test was not done on the farm. The test was done when the animal was presented at the slaughter facility. And it is our standard operating procedure that what they call downer animals will be tested if they come to the slaughter facility as a downer animal.

The farm has been identified since we got the test results back from the animal. We've then gone to the plant just this afternoon, found where the animal came from, and that's where investigation will begin in terms of looking at whether or not there's any other impacts on cows on that farm.

But at this point, the information with regard to the farm and the surrounding areas is still pretty preliminary.

**QUESTION:** (OFF-MIKE)

**VENEMAN:** I don't have that information at this point.

**QUESTION:** What is the likelihood that any of this cow made it into the food supply? I know that you have contacted the meat suppliers. Is there a recall under way?

**VENEMAN:** That is what we're trying to identify at this point. We do believe that the product from the animal went to two further processing plants.

This plant was a very small plant; it just slaughters a few animals. And our current understanding -- and, again, it's very preliminary -- is that that product did go to further processing plants.

But again, one thing that it's important to remember is that muscle cuts of meat have almost no risk. In fact, as far the science is concerned, I know of no science that's shown that you can transmit BSE from muscle cuts of meat.

So the fact that it's gone to further processing is not significant in terms of human health. But we are doing the trace-backs, we're looking at trace-forwards, where did the product go. And we will take appropriate actions as we make the determinations as to where the product and what has happened to it

**QUESTION:** (OFF-MIKE)

**VENEMAN:** I mentioned one of them, but there's actually two.

**MURANO:** Let me first reiterate what the secretary just said.

You should know that the tissues that are the infectious tissues from an animal that has BSE -- that is, the central nervous system tissues, the brain, spinal cord and so forth -- of this animal did not enter the food supply. Those tissues went to rendering, so they did not enter the food supply. That's very important to know.

**MURANO:** Now, the muscle cuts, as the secretary said, went from the slaughter facility to another facility that did the deboning. And that facility is Midway Meats, as the secretary mentioned.

Then from there, we believe that it went to two other facilities. One is called Willamette, and the second one is called Interstate Meat -- both in Washington state. Again, the muscle cuts, where there is virtually no risk of BSE, the materials, the brain, spinal cord, distal ileum, which is where the BSE agent resides, those materials did not enter the food supply.

**QUESTION:** Secretary, you said the health risks are minimal from this. But what if someone did eat meat contaminated with this? What are the health risks?

**VENEMAN:** Well, again, as Dr. Murano just indicated, there is virtually no chance that the meat has been contaminated. And the agents that would be the high-risk agents in any animal have been removed from this particular animal. So we really don't believe that there is -- we believe that the risk of any kind of human health effect is extremely low.

**QUESTION:** Right. But what if it is, what if it was, or if you find another cow on the farm is contaminated and it does get into the food supply -- just so people know?

**MURANO:** Well, you should know that certainly the agent that causes mad cow disease, as I said earlier, resides mainly in those tissues that I mentioned -- the brain, spinal cord, distal ileum -- which were removed from this animal and sent to rendering, so they were not in the food supply. The scientific community believes that there's no evidence to demonstrate that muscle cuts, or whole muscle meats that come from animals that are infected with the mad cow disease agent themselves -- the meat itself -- is infective to human beings. There's no evidence to show that. And that is as far as we can state that.

It's a good thing, obviously, that the infectious materials from this animal were removed and sent to rendering, which is something that we do as standard practice on these downer animals that are tested by APHIS.

**QUESTION:** I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about what's going to be happening in the U.K., specifically, and what your timetable is for getting final results on those tests?

**VENEMAN:** Well, as I indicated, the sample is being flown to a laboratory in the U.K., which is one of the world's best laboratories for analyzing BSE. And that will take a number of days, probably ...

**DEHAVEN:** Three to five days.

**VENEMAN:** ... probably three to five days to get final results on that sample.

So, again, we're getting it there as quickly as we possibly can. But the results that we've been able to confirm in our own laboratories have been something that we felt that we ought to take action on.

**QUESTION:** You said that you've quarantined the farm itself. Have you imposed any kind of quarantine on the slaughterhouse -- the three facilities that are downstream?

**VENEMAN:** Well, we have people that have gone into the slaughterhouse as well as are going into the downstream facilities, starting to review records. But we will be doing a complete review and investigation of the entire food chain where this animal might have been transferred during the process.

**QUESTION:** (OFF-MIKE)

**VENEMAN:** Well, I don't think you would normally impose a quarantine on a plant; you impose a quarantine on a farm. But we will be doing an investigation of the plants to determine exactly where the product might have gone.

**QUESTION:** (OFF-MIKE)

**VENEMAN:** Well, we're taking all appropriate action. We first need to identify where the product went before we can take action. I'm not saying that we're not taking action. As I said in my opening remarks, we're going to take all appropriate actions based upon the investigation. I know that the tendency is to want to know all the answers right away. And we decided that we couldn't wait to give the public the information about this situation.

But we certainly don't have all the answers today. And that's why we will be continuing to update both our Web site, we have the call-in number that I indicated earlier and we will be conducting daily briefings to update you on what's going on.

Thank you.

*Transcribed by eMediaMillWorks Inc.*

*Copyright © 2003 Associated Press*

**URL for this article:**

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB107223071470912100,00.html>

**Hyperlinks in this Article:**

(1) <http://www.usda.gov>

*Updated December 25, 2003 3:37 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](http://www.djreprints.com).