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UPDATE: USDA Announces First BSE Contamination

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

(Updates with Congressional hearings expected, President Bush being briefed and industry reaction)

WASHINGTON (AP)--A single Holstein cow on a Washington state farm has tested positive for mad cow disease, marking the first suspected appearance of the brain-wasting disease in the U.S., the Bush administration announced Tuesday as it assured Americans their food is safe.

Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said the slaughtered cow was screened earlier this month and any diseased parts were removed before they could enter the food supply and infect humans. Fear of the disease has brought economic ruin on beef industries in Europe and Canada.

"We remain confident in the safety of our food supply," Veneman told a hastily convened news conference. The farm near Yakima, Wash., where the cow originated, has been quarantined as officials trace how the animal contracted the disease and where its meat went.

"Even though the risk to human health is minimal, we will take all appropriate actions out of an abundance of caution," she said.

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Mad cow disease, known also as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, eats holes in the brains of cattle. It sprang up in Britain in 1986 and spread through countries in Europe and Asia, prompting massive destruction of herds and decimating the European beef industry.

A form of mad cow disease can be contracted by humans if they eat infected beef or nerve tissue, and possibly through blood transfusions. The human form of mad cow disease so far has killed 143 people in Britain and 10 elsewhere, none in the U.S. Blood donors possibly at risk for the disease are banned from

giving.

Wary of the potential economic impact on their U.S. market, beef producers quickly sought Tuesday to reassure consumers that infected meat wouldn't reach their tables. "There is no risk to consumers based upon the product that came from this animal," said Terry Stokes, chief executive of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Veneman also assured Americans the screening system worked, and no foul play was suspected. "This incident is not terrorist-related," she said. "I cannot stress this point strongly enough."

President George W. Bush was briefed a few times on the development Tuesday and was confident Veneman's department was handling the matter properly, the White House said.

With an election year approaching, the news alarmed some in Congress. Rep. Tim Holden, D-Pa., a member of the House Agriculture Committee, said he expected Congress to hold "extensive oversight" hearings when lawmakers return to Washington in late January.

Lawmakers are keenly aware that a case of mad cow disease in Canada last May - which officials described as a single, isolated incident - still had devastating economic consequences.

"If it's anything like what happened in Canada, it will be bad. The problem won't be that people will stop eating meat in the United States; the problem is the exports will be shut down like we did with Canada," said Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn.

Veneman said the Holstein, which couldn't move on its own, was found at a farm in Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima, and tested preliminarily positive for the brain-wasting illness on Dec. 9. Parts of the cow that would be infected - the brain, the spinal cord and the lower part of the small intestine - were removed before the animal went to a meat processing plant.

Samples from the cow have been sent to Britain for confirmation of the preliminary mad cow finding, Veneman said. The results will be known in three to five days. Veneman said consumers can get daily updates by reading the department's Web site or by calling 1-866-4USDACOM.

She said tests are made of all downed cows - old cows that aren't mobile -that are sent to slaughterhouses.

But Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y., said such cows shouldn't be in the food supply in the first place. The Senate passed such a ban earlier this year, but it failed to make it through the House.

"I blame it on greed, greed, greed," Ackerman said. "The greed of the industry, the greed of the lobbyists and the greed of the members of Congress."

Veneman said the Agriculture Department has had safeguards in place since 1990 to check for mad cow disease and 20,526 cows had been tested in 2003 in the U.S.

"This is a clear indication that our surveillance and detection program is working," Veneman said.

U.S. beef remains "absolutely safe to eat," she said.

"We see no reason for people to alter their eating habits," she said. "I plan to serve beef for my Christmas dinner."

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