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US Investigators Trying To Trace BSE Cow To Birth Herd

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WASHINGTON (AP)--Federal officials raced Wednesday to find out where a Washington state cow, apparently infected with **mad cow** disease, was born and may have been infected.

Even as the investigation continued, officials sought to reassure Americans about the safety of the nation's food supply. That didn't stop several nations from banning U.S. beef, including Japan, Taiwan and Mexico, the three largest importers.

U.S. Agriculture Department officials told a briefing that the cow joined the Washington State herd in October 2001 and was culled from other cows Dec. 9, after she became paralyzed, apparently as a result of calving.

But because the brain-wasting disease is usually transmitted through contaminated feed and has an incubation period four to five years, it's "important to focus on the feed where she was born" in 1999, USDA chief veterinarian Ron DeHaven said.

The impact was evident almost immediately: Eight nations, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, halted U.S. beef imports just hours after the Agriculture Department announced Tuesday that a so-called downed cow, meaning it was unable to move on its own, had tested positive for the brain-wasting disease.

Japan is the largest overseas market for U.S. beef.

The cow, from a farm near Yakima, Wash., was slaughtered Dec. 9. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said parts of the animal went to three processing plants in Washington State. But she said there was no danger to the food supply because "muscle cuts of meat have almost no risk."

Tests of tissue samples from the cow are being conducted in Britain to confirm the **mad cow** finding by a U.S. lab.

Agriculture Department officials and cattle industry executives tried to allay fears that U.S. beef supplies had become infected, saying the U.S. inspection system was working effectively: The farm where the cow originated has been quarantined and officials were tracing the movement of the cow from the farm to the slaughterhouse, and the flow of the meat to processing plants.

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"The important point is that the high-risk materials -that is, the brain and spinal column that would cause infectivity in humans - were removed from this cow," Veneman said on ABC's "Good Morning America" Wednesday.

She noted that the U.S. since the early 1990s has banned the use of cow and sheep byproducts for animal feed, which cuts off a major mode of transmission of the disease.

"We are in an abundance of caution," Veneman told NBC's "Today" show.

USDA officials announced early Wednesday that Vern's Moses Lake Meat Co. in Moses Lake, Wash., is voluntarily recalling approximately 10,410 pounds of raw beef that may have been exposed to tissues containing **mad cow**. They said the beef was produced 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's 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 early Wednesday.

Veneman also assured Americans that no foul play was suspected, saying "this incident is not terrorist-related."

Appearing on CBS' "The Early Show," Veneman asserted, "The risk is extremely low to human health and I would without hesitation say that no one should be afraid to eat beef."

Mad cow disease 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.

People can contract a form of **mad cow** disease 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.

Veneman said the risk to human health in this U.S. case was "extremely low."

Nonetheless, U.S. beef producers worried that they could suffer heavily from a **mad cow** scare. Restaurants that serve beef also could be affected.

Consumers Union, the publisher of Consumer Reports magazine, called on the government to test more cows for the disease, formally known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

"The U.S. needs to be far more proactive in protecting the American food supply," said Michael Hansen, a senior research associate. "We are very concerned that the diseased animal made it into the food supply and that the processing plants could be contaminated."

The disease was found in a Holstein cow, which couldn't move on its own, from a farm in Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima. Tissue samples were taken Dec. 9, and eventually tested positive for BSE. 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 - standard operating procedure in this country.

Samples from the cow were sent to Britain for confirmation of the preliminary **mad cow** finding, Veneman

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said. The results will be known in three to five days, she added. Consumers can get daily updates by reading the department's Web site or by calling 1-866-4USDACO.

Many residents of Mabton - population 2,045 - were protective of local cattle owners Tuesday and unwilling to discuss the matter with reporters, who were turned away from businesses and farms.

The apparent discovery of **mad cow** disease comes at a time when the U.S. beef industry is flourishing, in part because imports from Canada dried up after a single case of the disease was found there last spring and also in part because of the popularity of the Atkins high-protein diet .

A USDA Choice sirloin steak sells for more than \$6 per pound, compared with about \$4 per pound a year ago. The price of pound of ground beef is \$2.04, up from \$1.84 last year.

"The beef cattle industry has just had a resurgence of growth," said Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Miss. "This is going to be a setback."

Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said that while whole cuts of meat should be safe, there could be problems with ground meat, which can be mechanically stripped from the bone near an infected part.

"USDA needs to take swift action to insure that the meat that is found in hot dogs, hamburgers and those others doesn't pose a risk," DeWaal said.

The beef industry said there was nothing to worry about.

"The infectious agent is only found in the central nervous system tissue," said Patti Brumbach, executive director of the Washington State Beef Commission. "None of that made it into the beef supply. I think once consumers understand that the beef supply is safe, it should be a short-term concern."

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

But another member of the Agriculture Committee rushed to support the beef industry.

Rep. Cal Dooley, D-Calif., said, "People I think should not be frightened to have their prime rib on Christmas Eve."

Updated December 24, 2003 11:11 a.m.

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