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US Officials Release Tentative Info On Mad Cow Origin

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WASHINGTON (AP)--The Holstein infected with mad cow disease in Washington state was imported into the U.S. from Canada about two years ago, federal investigators tentatively concluded Saturday.

Dr. Ron DeHaven, chief veterinarian for the Agriculture Department, said Canadian officials have provided records that indicate the animal was one of a herd of 74 cattle that were shipped from Alberta, Canada, into this country at Eastport, Idaho.

"These animals were all dairy cattle and entered the U.S. only about two or two and a half years ago, so most of them are still likely alive," DeHaven said.

He emphasized that just because the sick cow was a member of that herd, it doesn't mean that all 74 animals are infected.

Canada found a case of mad cow disease in Alberta in May.

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Based on Canadian records, the diseased cow was 6 1/2 years old - older than U.S. officials first thought, DeHaven said. U.S. papers on the cow said she was 4 or 4 1/2 years old.

The age is significant, because the U.S. and Canada have banned feed that could be the source of infection since 1997. Farmers used to feed their animals meal containing tissue from other cattle and livestock to fatten them. Health officials in both countries banned such feed because infected tissue, such as the brain and spinal cord, could be in the meal.

The Agriculture Department also has recalled an estimated 10,000 pounds of meat cut from the infected

cow and from 19 other cows all slaughtered Dec. 9 at Vern's Moses Lake Meat Co., in Moses Lake, Wash.

Ken Peterson, of the department's Food Safety and Inspection Service, said officials still are trying to track the meat down.

He and other department officials have stressed that the U.S. meat is still considered safe, because the animal's brain and spinal cord were removed before the meat was processed.

Officials say the slaughtered cow was deboned at Midway Meats in Centralia, Ore., and the meat was sent to two other plants in the region, identified as Willamette and Interstate Meat, both near Portland, Ore.

Mad cow disease, formally known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is a public health concern because it is related to a human disease, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob. In the U.K., 143 people died of the human illness after an outbreak of mad cow in the 1980s. People can get it if they eat meat containing tissue from the brain and spine of an infected cow.

The animal most likely became sick from eating contaminated feed, so investigators with the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates animal feed, are tracking down what it ate. That is a difficult task because the cow may have gotten the disease years ago, long before it showed signs it was sick.

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