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USDA: 1 Holstein Cow Tested 'Presumptive' Positive BSE

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

WASHINGTON (AP)--The first-ever U.S. case of mad-cow disease is suspected in a single cow in Washington state, but the U.S. food supply is safe, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said Tuesday.

"We remain confident in the safety of our food supply," said Veneman.

She told a news conference that a single Holstein cow that was either sick or injured - thus never destined for the U.S. food supply - tested presumptively positive for the brain-wasting illness.

Mad cow disease, known also as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is a disease that 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.

Veneman said Tuesday: "This incident is not terrorist related... I cannot stress this point strongly enough."

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Veneman said the apparently diseased cow was found at a farm in Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima. She said the farm has been quarantined.

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

Samples from the cow have been sent to Britain for confirmation of the preliminary mad cow finding,

she said.

Mad cow disease has never been found in the U.S. before this incident despite intensive testing for it.

Corrected December 23, 2003 18:29 ET (23:29 GMT)

Veneman said the apparently diseased cow was found at a farm in Mabton, Wash., about 40 miles southeast of Yakima. She said the farm has been quarantined.

(In an item timed around 5:59 p.m. EST (2259 GMT), the name of the town in Washington State was misstated.)

However, there was a case of mad cow disease in Canada last May that officials described as a single, isolated incident.

Veneman said that it is doubtful that the case in Washington state was connected to the Canadian incident.

Veneman said a tissue sample from the suspect U.S. cow was taken Dec. 9 and had been tested at a laboratory in Ames, Iowa.

But she added that it is too early to say if the incident in Washington is an isolated case.

Veneman said the Agriculture Department has had safeguards in place since 1990 to check for mad cow disease and that 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.

She said U.S. beef remains "absolutely safe to eat," adding that she "plans to serve beef" at her Christmas dinner Thursday.

During her news conference, broadcast by U.S. cable news outlets, Veneman called the USDA's BSE test findings "presumptive positive."

She stressed that despite the preliminary findings, the risk to human health of BSE is "extremely low."

Veneman said that while the findings of the USDA are presumptive, the department has activated a BSE response plan.

"We are making the appropriate notifications and confirmations under the plan and startup activities are beginning," she said.

Veneman said she had been in contact with Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge about the BSE findings, but she emphasized that that she didn't see any connection between the mad-cow

contamination and the Bush administration's call for Americans to be on heightened alert against possible terrorist attacks in the U.S.

Veneman said that as part of the USDA's emergency response, the department will conduct regular briefings and updates for the public.

Asked by a reporter if the U.S. has informed trading partners about the BSE discovery, Veneman said, "we are in the process of notifying a whole range of people...including trading partners (but) I can't anticipate what they may do in response."

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