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MAD COW HITS THE U.S.

U.S. Rejects Widespread Testing Of Cattle at Slaughter for Now

By **SCOTT KILMAN**

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Agriculture Department rejected calls for it to quickly begin widespread testing of U.S. cattle for mad-cow disease.

The plunge in cattle prices, meanwhile, slowed Wednesday following the Bush administration's move to adopt tougher measures to keep any infected cattle out of the food supply, giving shell-shocked ranchers their first indication of where the bottom might lie.

On Wednesday, the price of the cattle futures contract for February delivery at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange didn't fall by its exchange-imposed limit -- the first time that has happened since the discovery of the first U.S. case of mad-cow disease was announced Dec. 23.

The contract, which Wednesday settled at 73.52 cents a pound, down 2.64 cents, has lost 19% of its value since the mad-cow news hit.

The Agriculture Department on Tuesday unveiled an overhaul package, including a new rule that meatpackers can't slaughter cattle that are unable to walk, the group of animals at highest risk of carrying mad-cow disease. But the department's chief veterinarian officer Wednesday spurned calls for even tougher changes, such as widespread testing of cattle, calling them "radical" moves.

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Ron DeHaven, the Agriculture Department official, said any decision about whether to conduct widespread testing of cattle at slaughter -- which is the policy of Japan and the European Union -- won't

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1 See [full coverage](#)² of the first case of mad-cow disease in the U.S.

Question of the Day:³ How much extra would you be willing to pay for beef to cover costs of increased testing?

be made until after the government completes its investigation into how a Holstein dairy cow in Mabton, Wash., got the disease. Japan tests all cattle at slaughter, while European cattle 30 months and older are tested before they are eaten.

Government officials in Japan, which immediately blocked the import of U.S. beef after the discovery of the sick Mabton cow, have signaled that they want the U.S. to begin broad testing. U.S. consumer-advocacy groups are

taking the same position.

Speaking to reporters after a quail-hunting trip Thursday, President Bush said Americans should feel comfortable eating beef and that U.S. agriculture officials were taking the right steps.

Mad-cow disease, technically known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, causes holes to form in the brains of its victims, leading to a loss of coordination and then death. People can contract a similar form of the disease, known as variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, by eating contaminated beef products, especially brain and spinal-cord tissue.

It is far from clear how long the investigation will take, whether U.S. officials will ever conclusively identify the source of the infection, and whether they can get control of any other exposed cattle. Mad-cow disease, which first flared up in Britain in the 1980s, has since spread to 23 other nations through cattle eating livestock rations contaminated with the rendered scraps of infected cattle.

So far, the early evidence is helping U.S. officials to build a case that the Mabton cow came from Alberta, Canada, in 2001 already infected with the disease. But that is little consolation because millions of Canadian-born cattle have been exported to the U.S. in recent years.

U.S. officials have gone to great lengths to point out that the cow's likely birth in April 1997 means she had the opportunity to eat high-risk materials for months before regulators in Canada and the U.S. began prohibiting their livestock feed industries from using rendered cattle remains as a source of protein in products intended for cattle consumption. But regulators might never know whether she was exposed after the ban.

The U.S. has looked for mad-cow disease by annually testing about 20,000 of the nonambulatory cattle that arrive at meatpackers. "Downers," as these animals are called, are the group most likely to have the neurological disorder. Last year, about 200,000 of the 35 million cattle slaughtered in the U.S. were downers.

Now that downers can no longer arrive at meatpacking plants, the Agriculture Department is setting up procedures to test these animals at rendering plants and on farms.

The government's surveillance system was set up to detect mad-cow disease if it appears in one out of one million cattle. The U.S. has a cattle population of 96 million. The sick Mabton cow was a downer,

and while her brains were sent away for testing, her meat was sent directly into the food supply because there was evidence that her inability to walk was caused not by a neurological problem but because of an injury suffered while giving birth.

In the latest developments from the investigation, the Agriculture Department said it has found nine of the 81 cattle believed to have accompanied the mad-cow-infected Holstein dairy cow when she entered the U.S. from Canada two years ago.

Those nine cattle are on the Mabton dairy farm where the infected dairy cow lived until she was sent to slaughter on Dec. 9. The Mabton farm, which houses about 4,000 dairy cattle, has been under quarantine. Another farm in Washington state, which bought a bull calf of the infected Mabton cow, is also under quarantine.

Investigators have yet to locate the other cattle that crossed into the U.S. two years ago with the Mabton cow, which investigators suspect are still in Washington state.

Officials in Canada, meanwhile, are looking for any links between the Mabton Holstein cow and an Angus beef cow of similar age in Alberta that was diagnosed with the mad-cow disease in May. Among other things, Canadian regulators are studying feed records to see whether the two animals could have eaten livestock feed containing ingredients made by the same rendering company while they lived in Alberta.

Canadian officials didn't identify the rendering company, but the only large one in western Canada is West Coast Reduction Ltd., based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The West Coast Reduction plant that would have supplied ingredients to just about all feed mills in northern Alberta is located in Edmonton. Alberta's confirmed BSE case was an Angus beef cow that spent the last years of her life on a farm in northern Alberta. The Mabton cow is thought to have spent the first four years of her life on a farm north of Edmonton.

Barry Glotman, president of West Coast Reduction, said the company's facilities are regularly inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and operate "100% in compliance" with government regulations. "We've been audited many times," he said.

Write to Scott Kilman at scott.kilman@wsj.com⁴

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