



December 30, 2003 5:22 p.m. EST

# USDA Tightens Regulations On Cattle To Protect Food Supply

By RICHARD GIBSON

OF DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

DES MOINES, Iowa -- The U.S. government said Tuesday it will tighten livestock slaughter regulations to better protect the human food supply from possible contamination by sick cattle.

Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman said the U.S. will immediately ban all "downer," or nonambulatory, cattle from the food chain. Such animals either won't be shipped to slaughterhouses or, if slaughtered, will have their carcasses tested for contamination by mad cow disease and withheld from processing until results are known.

An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 such incapacitated animals move through the U.S. food chain annually now, Veneman said.

The USDA also is declaring tissues from the heads and spinal columns, as well as small intestines, of cattle "high risk" and therefore will be considered unfit for human consumption.

Also, an automated technology that trims meat from close to the bone, called Advance Meat Recovery, won't be used on cattle skulls, Veneman said.

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Finally, stunning cattle in slaughter plants with air-injection systems will be prohibited, so as to decrease the risk that any brain material would become dislodged and contaminate other meat in the area.

The tougher regulations come a week after the discovery in Washington state of a lone dairy cow

infected with mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, BSE. But Veneman insisted that the steps she announced had been under consideration since last May, when a single case of BSE was found on a farm in Canada.

"I don't expect an increase in price to consumers" because of the new regulations, Veneman said during a Washington news conference.

For the fourth straight trading session, live cattle futures prices plunged the daily limit on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Tuesday.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the major U.S. cattle-producers' trade organization, quickly endorsed the USDA's regulatory actions.

"We look forward to working with the government on the surveillance and monitoring for nonambulatory animals," an association official said during a news conference.

One consequence of those regulations could be that producers "do a better job of animal husbandry and get their animals to market in an ambulatory sense," another cattlemen's official said.

The group applauded the USDA's vow to speed up a national livestock animal identification system, so as to more quickly trace the origin of animals that may present a health threat.

Although cattle producers are likely to have to absorb some of the costs of the tighter regulations, an association official said it was too early to estimate the potential pricetag. But whatever it might be, he said, "We think this program will cost, but it will pay in the long run."

Association Chief Executive Terry Stokes said conversations with various wholesalers and retailers of beef around the U.S. "are confirming that consumer demand for beef remains constant.... Consumers understand that U.S. beef is the safest in the world."

Despite lobbying efforts by a USDA delegation visiting with officials in Japan and South Korea, those countries have indicated they intend to maintain their temporary ban on U.S. beef imports until more is known about the Washington State case and the overall safety of U.S. beef exports is assured.

All told, about 30 countries, representing \$3.5 billion, or 90%, of annual U.S. beef exports, are "in limbo" because of the mad cow discovery, a cattlemen's association representative said.

The group said convincing overseas trading partners, particularly those in Asia, to lift their ban may take considerable time.

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[http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,BT\\_CO\\_20031230\\_003979,00.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,BT_CO_20031230_003979,00.html)

*Updated December 30, 2003 5:22 p.m.*

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