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Washington Gov Locke Calls For More Mad Cow Protections

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

SEATTLE (AP)--Washington state should go beyond the latest proposals by the U.S. Agriculture Department to guard against mad cow disease, Gov. Gary Locke says.

Locke called Tuesday for a national effort to come up with a fast, economical test for the disease in live cattle. Currently, the diagnosis is done by testing a sample of the brain or spinal cord after an animal has been killed.

He also wants to see state labs certified to test for mad cow disease. Currently, there is only one U.S. lab that does the testing and it is in Ames, Iowa.

The first case of mad cow disease in the U.S. was found in a dairy cow from a Mabton farm in central Washington. The Holstein was slaughtered on Dec. 9. Test result confirmation of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, came Dec. 25.

Locke praised the steps announced Tuesday in Washington, D.C., by U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman to ban meat from all downer cows and speed up creation of a nationwide animal tracking system.

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The national changes will include more rapid testing of cattle at higher risk of mad cow disease because of age or the presence of neurological problems. Their meat won't be processed until test results are back.

Under the new U.S. regulations, the sick cow slaughtered in Washington wouldn't have been allowed to

enter the food chain.

But Locke added, "I think we can do more and we should do more."

That includes testing all downer cattle - animals that can't walk or stand on their own - "whether at rendering plants or even at the farm," he said.

The governor's suggestions were just the start of examining what other steps the state might take, Locke spokesman Roger Nyhus said.

"We are looking into what things the state can do beyond what was announced today," Nyhus said.

Veneman has acknowledged that barring downer cattle from being slaughtered for human consumption will force the USDA to change its system of testing for mad cow disease.

In Washington state, the beef industry is a \$600 million business, Locke said, including nearly \$100 million in exports, and employs more than 10,000 people, directly and indirectly.

"We need to make sure that we're doing everything we can to protect the safety and the integrity of the food supply," the governor said.

The fate of dairy cows from the Sunny Dene Ranch that was home to the sick cow hasn't been determined, Veneman and state officials said Tuesday. Nor has the fate of 464 bull calves - including one of the mad cow's offspring - being held at an unidentified farm in Sunnyside, near Mabton.

In the rush to put out information of national importance, the USDA said prematurely Monday that the entire herd of young bulls would be killed, said Ed Curlett, a spokesman for the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

"That's the cause of a discrepancy like this," Curlett said late Tuesday in a telephone interview. "It was done in good faith, but when we're putting out and sifting through a lot of information, it is more piecemeal than we would like."

The mad cow's bull calf wasn't tagged, making it more difficult to identify.

On Tuesday, Curlett said authorities were working to determine the age ranges of the bull calves in the herd to narrow the number of calves that might have to be destroyed.

"For this facility, there will most likely be a number of animals sacrificed, but the final number is not yet determined," he said. "We're working with the herd owner and trying to determine the best way to go from here."

Authorities have said there is no evidence that mad cow disease is transmitted from animal to animal or from mother to calf.

As for any reimbursement for the owners, Locke said he had talked with Veneman on Monday, asking that the federal government pay market price for any animals destroyed. No decision has yet been made on that, he said.

The infected cow had three calves after it entered the U.S. from Canada, officials have said. One calf died, one is at the Sunnyside farm, and the third remains in isolation at the Sunny Dene Ranch.

The meat from the cow was allowed to be sold for human consumption after its brain and spinal column were removed and a federal inspector saw no indication of neurological disease.

The USDA ordered a recall of more than 10,000 pounds of meat from 20 cows slaughtered with the Holstein. The recalled meat was distributed to eight states and Guam, although officials said 80% of it went to Oregon and Washington.

USDA officials have said they ordered the recall as a precaution, insisting there was no threat to the safety of the U.S. food supply.

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE, is a concern because humans who eat brain or spinal matter from an infected cow can develop a fatal brain-wasting illness, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. During a mad cow outbreak in the 1980s, 143 people died of it in Britain.

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