

JANUARY 12, 2004

NEWS: ANALYSIS &amp; COMMENTARY

## Commentary: A Bum Steer On Mad Cow Disease

**Despite USDA reassurances, America's beef supply -- and its citizens -- are at risk**

One week after confirming the nation's first case of mad cow disease, the U.S. Agriculture Dept. took a first step toward dealing with the crisis. On Dec. 30, Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman announced that "downer" cows, which are animals too sick to walk, will no longer end up on our dinner plates. Falling down is a key symptom of mad cow disease -- otherwise known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) -- yet meat from hundreds of thousands of lame cows was being packed up and sent to supermarkets every year. The ban on that practice is the linchpin in the USDA's response to the incident, which also includes a provision outlawing the use of heads, spinal tissue, and other potentially infectious body parts from older cows in human food.

On the surface, it may look like the USDA is finally waking up. But these new measures are not enough. For years, and even today, the department has insisted that the nation's beef supply is not at risk. Its downplaying of the disease is reminiscent of the British government's initial reaction to an outbreak in England of mad cow disease in 1989. Then-Agriculture Minister John Gummer even fed his 4-year-old daughter a hamburger on television to prove how safe the meat was. We know what happened in Britain: More than 130 people died, and millions of cattle had to be destroyed. Eventually, though, the Brits got their act together and now have a rigorous testing program in place. Here in the U.S., though, the USDA caved to strong lobbying by cattlemen who opposed stricter, more expensive controls.

Other countries do much more to protect their citizens. In Japan, all cattle slaughtered for food, and, in Europe, all such cattle age 30 months and older, are tested for BSE -- costing just a few cents per pound. That compares with just 20,000 cattle tested in the U.S., or less than 0.001% of the 36 million animals slaughtered here each year.

Now the cattle industry's successful lobbying is coming back to haunt it. Health issues, of course, remain paramount, but there's big money at risk here, too. Upon the discovery of the sick U.S. cow, 30 countries banned imports of American beef, including Japan, Australia, and Mexico. Those bans of U.S. beef exports could cost the economy \$2 billion in 2004, estimates Chris Hurt, a Purdue University agricultural economist.

Despite the USDA's reassurances, many food-safety experts fear that the ban on feeding bovine by-products to other cows won't actually protect America from mad cow disease. That's because it has some gaping loopholes. First, the ban doesn't outlaw the feeding of cow's blood to other cows. Beef farmers often feed dried cattle blood to calves as a supplement to promote faster weight gain. Some experts worry that could spread BSE.

If that's not enough to turn you into a vegetarian, consider a second loophole: The regulations don't ban feeding cattle by-products to poultry and poultry droppings to cattle. Poultry is not susceptible to mad cow disease, but it's possible that the illness could be passed through them to cattle because commercial cow feed often contains a mix of poultry droppings and grain. "We know this is a disease that's transmitted through feeding, yet we still feed billions of pounds of cow by-products back to livestock," says John Stauber, co-author of the 1997 book *Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?* "The reality is, this ban is fatally flawed."

Our food supply may never be completely safe until all beef is tested. The USDA says it's considering additional testing. The beef industry isn't yet convinced it needs to change, though so far it hasn't approved new tests that return results in a few hours, rather than the eight days or more that current tests take. "We believe it's a waste of resources to test every animal," says Gary Weber, executive director of regulatory affairs for the National Cattleman's Beef Assn.

That's a weak argument. Think about it this way: Even though the risks of human illness are slight, a few cents per pound isn't a high cost for assurance that the steak on our dinner tables isn't going to kill us. That logic shouldn't be too hard for the Ag Dept. and the cattle industry to figure out.

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