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Mad Cow USA: The Nightmare Begins

John Stauber, AlterNet
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When Sheldon Rampton and I wrote our 1997 book, "Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?", it received favorable reviews from some interesting publications such as the Journal of the American Medical Association, New Scientist, and Chemical & Engineering News. Yet although the book was released just before the infamous Texas trial of Oprah Winfrey and her guest Howard Lyman, for the alleged crime of "food disparagement," the book was ignored by the mainstream media, and even most left and alternative publications failed to review it.

Apparently many people who never read it at the time bought the official government and industry spin that mad cow disease was just some hysterical European food scare, not a deadly human and animal disease that could emerge in America. In March, 1996, when the British government reversed itself after ten years of denial and announced that young people were dying from the fatal dementia called variant CJD -- mad cow disease in humans -- the United States media dutifully echoed reassurances from government and livestock industry officials that all necessary precautions had been taken long ago to guard against the disease.

Those who did read "Mad Cow USA" when it was published in November, 1997, however, realized that the United States assurances of safety were based on public relations and public deception, not science or adequate regulatory safeguards. We revealed that the United States Department of Agriculture knew more than a decade ago that to prevent mad cow disease in America would require a strict ban on "animal cannibalism," the feeding of rendered slaughterhouse waste from cattle to cattle as protein and fat supplements, but refused to support the ban because it would cost the meat industry money.

It was the livestock feed industry that led the effort in the early 1990s to lobby into law the Texas food disparagement act, and when an uppity Oprah hosted an April 1996, program featuring rancher-turned vegan activist Howard Lyman, she and her guest became the first

people sued for the crime of sullyng the good name of beef. Oprah eventually won her lawsuit, but it cost her years of legal battling and millions of dollars. In reality, the public lost, because mainstream media stopped covering the issue of mad cow disease. As one TV network producer told me at the time, his orders were to keep his network from being sued the way Oprah had been.

In the six years since the publication of "Mad Cow USA," Sheldon Rampton and I have spoken out in media interviews, at conferences of United States families who had lost relatives to CJD, and we saw our book published in both South Korea and Japan. Our activism won us some interesting enemies, such as Richard Berman, a Republican lobbyist who runs an industry-funded front group that calls itself The Center for Consumer Freedom. Berman is a darling of the tobacco, booze, biotech and food industries, and with their funding he issued an online report depicting us as the ring leaders of a dangerous conspiracy of vegetarian food terrorists out to destroy the United States food system. Last week alone he issued two national news releases attempting to smear us.

Of course, he had an easier time attacking us before the emergence of mad cow disease in America. I was saddened but not surprised when mad cow disease was finally discovered in the United States. When the first North American cow with the disease was found last May in Canada, I told interviewers that if the disease was in Canada, it would also be found in the United States and Mexico, since all three NAFTA nations are one big free trade zone and all three countries feed their cattle slaughterhouse waste in the form of blood, fat and rendered meat and bone meal. In fact, in North America calves are literally weaned on milk formula containing "raw spray dried cattle blood plasma," even though scientists have known for many years that blood can transmit mad cow type diseases.

(This is why if you try to donate your blood to the Red Cross, you will be rejected if you spent significant time in Britain during the height of its mad cow epidemic. Britain is afraid that humans with mad cow disease may have contaminated the British blood supply, and they do not use its own blood plasma since as yet no test can adequately screen blood for mad cow disease.)

The United States has spent millions of dollars on PR convincing Americans that mad cow could never happen here, and now the USDA is engaged in a crisis management plan that has federal and state officials, livestock industry flacks, scientists and other trusted experts assuring the public that this is no big deal. Their litany of falsehoods include statements that a "firewall" feed ban has been in place in the United States since 1997, that muscle meat is not infective, that no slaughterhouse waste is fed to cows, that the United States tests adequate numbers of cattle for mad cow disease, that quarantines and meat recalls are just an added measure of safety, that the risks of this mysterious killer are miniscule, that no one in the United States has ever died of any such disease, and on and on.

The latest spin is to blame the United States mad cow crisis on Canada. On Saturday, December

27, with no conclusive proof whatsoever, the United States Department of Agriculture announced that the mad cow in Washington state had actually entered the United States years ago from Canada. This set off an understandable howl from the Canadian government, and by Sunday the United States was forced to back off somewhat, but clearly the PR ploy is to get Americans thinking that this is Canada's problem, not ours.

Even if Canada does turn out to be the source of America's first case of mad cow disease, numerous questions remain: How many other infected cows have crossed our porous borders and been processed into human and animal food? Why are United States slaughterhouse regulations so lax that a visibly sick cow was sent into the human food chain weeks before tests came back with the mad cow findings? Where did the infected byproduct feed that this animal ate come from, and how many thousands of other animals have eaten similar feed?

Since the announcement of United States mad cow disease our phones have rung off the hook with interview requests. The New York Times noted that "The 1997 book 'Mad Cow USA', by Sheldon Rampton and John C. Stauber, made the case that the disease could enter the United States from Europe in contaminated feed." Articles in the New York Times also cited other warnings from Consumer Union's Michael Hansen, and Dr. Stanley Prusiner, the Nobel Prize-winning researcher who this week called the current United States practice of weaning calves on cattle blood protein "stupid." All of this would be very vindicating, except for one problem: the millions of dollars that the government and industry are spending on PR to pull the wool over the public's eyes might just succeed in forestalling the necessary steps that now, at this late date, must still be taken to adequately deal with this crisis.

The good news is that those steps are rather simple and understandable. We should ship Ann Veneman and her smartest advisors to Britain where they can copy the successful feed and testing regulations that have solved the mad cow problem in Europe. Veneman and her advisors should institute a complete and total ban on feeding any slaughterhouse waste to livestock. You may think this is already the case because that's what industry and government said they did back in the summer of 1997. But beside the cattle blood being legally fed back to cattle, billions of pounds of rendered fat, blood meal, meat and bone meal from pigs and poultry are rendered and fed to cattle, and cattle are rendered and fed to other food species, a perfect environment for spreading and amplifying mad cow disease and even for creating new strains of the disease.

The feed rules that the United States must adopt can be summarized this way: you might not be a vegetarian, but the animals you eat must be. The United States must also institute an immediate testing regime that will test millions of cattle, not the 20,000 tested out of 35 million slaughtered in the past year in the United States. Japan now tests all cattle before consumption, and disease experts like Dr. Prusiner recommend this goal for the United States. And of course, no sick "downer" cows, barely able to move, should be fed to any humans. These are the type of animals most likely to be infected with mad cow and other ailments -- although mad cows can also seem completely healthy at the time of slaughter, which is why testing all animals must be the goal.

Ann Veneman and the Bush administration, unfortunately, currently have no plans to do the right thing. The United States meat industry still believes that the millions of dollars in campaign contributions doled out over the years will continue to forestall the necessary regulations, and that soothing PR assurances will convince the consuming public that this is just some vegetarian fear-mongering conspiracy concocted by the media to sell organic food. Will the American public buy this bull? It has in the past. Much depends on journalists and what they are willing to swallow. It looks to me as if papers such as the Wall Street Journal and New York Times are finally putting some good investigative reporting teams onto this issue, and that may undercut and expose PR ruses such as the "blame Canada campaign."

What I can predict is that the international boycott of United States beef, rendered byproducts, animals and animal products will continue, and this will apply a major economic hurt to meat producers big and small across the country. Will their anger turn against the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the Animal Feed Industry Association and other lobbies that have prevented the United States from doing the right thing in the past? Or will this become some sort of nationalistic food culture issue, with confused consumers and family farmers blaming everyone but the real culprits in industry and government?

We must continue to advocate for the United States to do the right thing: Follow the lead of the European Union nations, ban all "animal cannibalism," and test more or all animals. In the meantime, if you want safe American beef, search out products that are certified organic and guaranteed not to be fed slaughterhouse waste such as calf formula made from cattle blood. An excellent source of information on the web is the site of the [Organic Consumers Association](#).

Our book, "Mad Cow USA," is temporarily unavailable until a paperback copy is released later in 2004. However, you can get the book in its entirety for free through the website of our Center for Media & Democracy. Simply go to www.prwatch.org and click on the cover of "Mad Cow USA." You'll be taken to www.prwatch.org/books/mcusa.pdf where you can download for free the entire book -- and read the warnings that went unheeded then, and are still being ignored by government regulators and industry.

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