

January 2, 2004

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## The Cow Jumped Over the U.S.D.A.

By ERIC SCHLOSSER

**A**lisa Harrison has worked tirelessly the last two weeks to spread the message that bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease, is not a risk to American consumers. As spokeswoman for Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman, Ms. Harrison has helped guide news coverage of the mad cow crisis, issuing statements, managing press conferences and reassuring the world that American beef is safe.

For her, it's a familiar message. Before joining the department, Ms. Harrison was director of public relations for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the beef industry's largest trade group, where she battled government food safety efforts, criticized Oprah Winfrey for raising health questions about American hamburgers, and sent out press releases with titles like "Mad Cow Disease Not a Problem in the U.S."

Ms. Harrison may well be a decent and sincere person who feels she has the public's best interest at heart. Nonetheless, her effortless transition from the cattlemen's lobby to the Agriculture Department is a fine symbol of all that is wrong with America's food safety system. Right now you'd have a hard time finding a federal agency more completely dominated by the industry it was created to regulate. Dale Moore, Ms. Veneman's chief of staff, was previously the chief lobbyist for the cattlemen's association. Other veterans of that group have high-ranking jobs at the department, as do former meat-packing executives and a former president of the National Pork Producers Council.

The Agriculture Department has a dual, often contradictory mandate: to promote the sale of meat on behalf of American producers and to guarantee that American meat is safe on behalf of consumers. For too long the emphasis has been on commerce, at the expense of safety. The safeguards against mad cow that Ms. Veneman announced on Tuesday — including the elimination of "downer cattle" (cows that cannot walk) from the food chain, the removal of high-risk material like spinal cords from meat processing, the promise to introduce a system to trace cattle back to the ranch — have long been demanded by consumer groups. Their belated introduction seems to have been largely motivated by the desire to have foreign countries lift restrictions on American beef imports.

Worse, on Wednesday Ms. Veneman ruled out the most important step to protect Americans from mad cow disease: a large-scale program to test the nation's cattle for bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

The beef industry has fought for nearly two decades against government testing for any dangerous pathogens, and it isn't hard to guess why: when there is no true grasp of how far and wide a food-borne pathogen has spread, there's no obligation to bear the cost of dealing with it.

The United States Department of Agriculture is by no means the first such body to be captured by industry groups. In Europe and Japan the spread of disease was facilitated by the repeated failure of government ministries to act on behalf of consumers.

In Britain, where mad cow disease was discovered, the ministry of agriculture misled the public about the risks of the disease from the very beginning. In December 1986, the first government memo on the new pathogen warned that it might have "severe repercussions to the export trade and possibly also for humans" and thus all news of it was to be kept "confidential." Ten years later, when Britons began to fall sick with a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob syndrome, thought to be the human form of mad cow, Agriculture Minister Douglas Hogg assured them that "British beef is wholly safe." It was something of a shock, three months later, when the health minister, Stephen Dorrell, told Parliament that mad cow disease might indeed be able to cross the species barrier and sicken human beings.

In the wake of that scandal, France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Japan banned imports of British beef — yet they denied for years there was any risk of mad cow disease among their own cattle. Those denials proved false, once widespread testing for the disease was introduced. An investigation by the French Senate in 2001 found that the Agriculture Ministry minimized the threat of mad cow and "constantly sought to prevent or delay the introduction of precautionary measures" that "might have had an adverse effect on the competitiveness of the agri-foodstuffs industry." In Tokyo, a similar mad cow investigation in 2002 accused the Japanese Agriculture Ministry of "serious maladministration" and concluded that it had "always considered the immediate interests of producers in its policy judgments."

Instead of learning from the mistakes of other countries, America now seems to be repeating them. In the past week much has been made of the "firewall" now protecting American cattle from infection with mad cow disease — the ban on feeding rendered cattle meat or beef byproducts to cattle that was imposed by the Food and Drug Administration in 1997. That ban has been cited again and again by Agriculture Department and industry spokesmen as some sort of guarantee that mad cow has not taken hold in the United States. Unfortunately, this firewall may have gaps big enough to let a herd of steer wander through it.

First, the current ban still allows the feeding of cattle blood to young calves — a practice that Stanley Prusiner, who won the Nobel Prize in medicine for his work on the proteins that cause mad cow disease, calls "a really stupid idea." More important, the ban on feed has hardly been enforced. A 2001 study by the Government Accounting Office found that one-fifth of American feed and rendering companies that handle prohibited material had no systems in place to prevent the contamination of cattle feed.

According to the report, more than a quarter of feed manufacturers in Colorado, one of the top beef-producing states, were not even aware of the F.D.A. measures to prevent mad cow disease, four years after their introduction.

A follow-up study by the accounting office in 2002 said that the F.D.A.'s "inspection database is so severely flawed" that "it should not be used to assess compliance" with the feed ban. Indeed, 14 years after Britain announced its ban on feeding cattle proteins to cattle, the Food and Drug Administration still did not have a complete listing of the American companies rendering cattle and manufacturing cattle feed.

The Washington State Holstein at the center of the current mad cow crisis may have been born in Canada, but even that possibility offers little assurance about the state of mad cow disease in the United States. Last year 1.7 million live cattle were imported from Canada — and almost a million more came from Mexico, a country whose agricultural ministry has been even slower than its American counterpart to impose strict safeguards against mad cow disease.

Last year the Agriculture Department tested only 20,000 cattle for bovine spongiform encephalopathy, out of the roughly 35 million slaughtered. Belgium, with a cattle population a small fraction of ours, tested about 20 times that number for the disease. Japan tests every cow and steer that people are going to eat.

Instead of testing American cattle, the government has heavily relied on work by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis to determine how much of a threat mad cow disease poses to the United States. For the past week the Agriculture Department has emphasized the reassuring findings of these Harvard studies, but a closer examination of them is not comforting. Although thorough and well intended, they are based on computer models of how mad cow disease might spread. Their accuracy is dependent on their underlying assumptions. "Our model is not amenable to formal validation," says the Harvard group in its main report, "because there are no controlled experiments in which the introduction and consequences of B.S.E. introduction to a country has been monitored and measured."

Unfortunately, "formal validation" is exactly what we need. And the only way to get it is to begin widespread testing of American cattle for mad cow disease — with particular focus on dairy cattle, the animals at highest risk for the disease and whose meat provides most of the nation's fast food hamburgers.

In addition, we need to give the federal government mandatory recall powers, so that any contaminated or suspect meat can be swiftly removed from the market. As of now all meat recalls are voluntary and remarkably ineffective at getting bad meat off supermarket shelves. And most of all, we need to create an independent food safety agency whose sole responsibility is to protect the public health. Let the Agriculture Department continue to promote American meat worldwide — but empower a new agency to ensure that meat is safe to eat.

Yes, the threat to human health posed by mad cow remains uncertain. But testing American cattle for dangerous pathogens will increase the cost of beef by just pennies per pound. Failing to do so could impose a far higher price, both in dollars and in human suffering.

*Eric Schlosser is author of "Fast Food Nation" and "Reefer Madness."*

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)