

ACTION ALERT

May 21, 2003

USDA Places Canada Under BSE Restriction Guidelines; Continues Ongoing Action to Ensure Food Safety

By now, you've seen the media reports about the discovery of a single instance of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), widely known as "mad cow disease," in Canada. USDA is placing Canada under its BSE restriction guidelines and will not accept any ruminants or ruminant products from Canada pending further investigation. Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman stated that the risk to human health and the possibility of transmission to animals in the United States is extremely low.

Your customers may have questions as to the safety of the nation's beef supply and the steps which the U.S. government is taking. At the outset, it is important to emphasize that **BSE Has NOT been found in the United States, and that no cases of BSE have ever been confirmed in the United States within 12 years of active surveillance.** In addition, the most comprehensive study to date has shown that the occurrence of BSE in the United States is highly unlikely. Can the government guarantee that BSE will never occur in the United States? There are still a number of unknowns regarding the origin and transmission of BSE. Given these scientific uncertainties, no one can assure zero risk from BSE. However, USDA can and will continue to monitor new scientific findings and world events and adjust its regulations and policies to keep the risk of BSE infecting the national herd as low as possible.

BSE-Prevention Action Steps Taken by USDA

Since 1989, the U.S. government has taken a series of preventive actions to protect against this animal disease. This includes USDA prohibitions on the import of live ruminants, such as cattle, sheep, goats and most ruminant products from countries that have or are considered to be at risk for having BSE. In 1997, the Food and Drug Administration prohibited the use of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feed intended for cows and other ruminants to stop the way the disease is thought to spread.

In November 2001, Harvard University published a landmark three-year risk analysis on BSE, representing the most comprehensive risk assessment ever done on BSE. **This detailed assessment showed that the occurrence of BSE in the United States is highly unlikely.** USDA is conducting an independent peer review of the study to confirm its findings. The scientists expect to complete their work by June 2003. In response to the report, USDA announced a series of actions it would take, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to strengthen BSE prevention programs in an effort to maintain the government's

vigilance against the disease. First, **USDA has more than tripled the number of cattle it tested BSE during the last fiscal year.** In fiscal year 2002, USDA tested 19,990 cattle for BSE using a targeted surveillance approach designed to test the highest risk animals, including downer animals (animals that are non-ambulatory at slaughter), animals that die on the farm, older animals and animals exhibiting signs of neurological distress. During FY 2001, USDA tested 5,272. Both figures are significantly higher than the standards set by the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), the standard setting organization for animal health for 162 member nations. Under the international standard, a BSE-free country like the United States would be required to test only 433 head of cattle per year. **The USDA is now testing 41 times that amount.**

In addition, USDA has proposed revisions to existing directives regarding advanced meat recovery (AMR) systems and prohibiting the use of vertebral column from certain categories of cattle. A rule was finalized in December 2002, instructing inspectors at beef establishments using vertebral columns as source materials in AMR systems to take routine regulatory samples to verify that spinal cord is not present in AMR product. If spinal cord tissue is present, then the product does not meet Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) labeling and inspection requirements for meat. FSIS will also publish a rule this summer to clarify that vertebral column should not be used as a source material unless the establishment has effective process control measures in place to ensure that central nervous system tissue is not present in meat derived from AMR systems. A final rule is expected on AMR by December 2003. FSIS is also working to complete a rule prohibiting the use of air-injection stunning devices used to immobilize cattle during slaughter, and is working on a rule directing people who deal with dead, dying, disease and downer animals that they are required to register with FSIS. This is being issued to assist with traceback if BSE were detected and to assist FDA in enforcing its feed ban. The Animal and Plant Health inspection Service (APHIS) also plans to issue new rules for the disposal of dead stock on farms and ranches. Such cattle are considered an important potential pathway for the spread of BSE in the animal feed chain.

N.G.A. will follow up with additional information as it becomes available. For more information about BSE and the efforts being taken to prevent its entry and spread into the United States, visit <http://www.usda.gov/>, and <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/bse/bse.html>. USDA continues to educate U.S. cattle producers, veterinarians, industry groups and the general public on BSE through numerous briefings and press conferences. Fact sheets, a videotape on BSE and information packets are distributed widely to veterinarians, extension offices, universities and industry groups. If you have any questions, or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact the N.G.A. Public Affairs Department at (703) 516-0700 or publicaffairs@nationalgrocers.org.

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