## Seattle Times

Jan 9, 2004

Friday circulation: 238,000

## Get mad: Test every cow

Full story:

http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.co m/cai-

bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=m adcow09&date=20040109

By Andrew Knight Special to The Times

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's recent decision to ban from human consumption cows too sick or injured to stand is a very belated step in the right direction. For years, animal-welfare and public-health experts have been calling for a ban, but bills have repeatedly been blocked by legislators obedient to an industry keen to extract every last dollar from these suffering animals. Rather than being dragged to slaughter, these animals should be humanely euthanized on the farm.

However, the USDA's decision will not end the risks to American consumers; not by a long way. Cows affected by mad-cow disease commonly take years to display any signs at all, let alone becoming too sick to stand, and the average American cow is slaughtered at less than two years of age.

Hence, the majority of mad cows will continue to pass undetected into the human food supply without a very thorough surveillance system. And the U.S. surveillance system would be considered a joke if people weren't likely to die from its shortcomings.

We slaughter around 35 million cows annually, and last year tested a paltry 20,000 for mad-cow disease, not even 1

in 1,700. In contrast, Europe tests almost a million cows each month. France, which has a fraction of the U.S. cattle population, tests more cows in a week than the U.S. tests in a decade.

Japan, formerly the biggest U.S. export market, tests every cow destined for human consumption, and our industry representatives complain that Japan won't reopen its doors to American beef. Small wonder.

Dr. Stanley Prusiner, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery of prions, those deadly microscopic invokers of mad-cow disease, describes U.S. testing as "appalling."

In fact, it is something of a miracle that the single American mad cow was detected at all. Had she not been paralyzed while giving birth and consequently unable to stand, it is extremely unlikely she would have been tested.

Given that our "appalling" surveillance system managed to accidentally detect a single mad cow, it is guite likely that a thorough European-style system would detect a substantial number of cattle infected with mad cow and other dangerous diseases. In fact, for the one mad cow detected thus far, it is not unlikely that some 1,700 have passed undetected into the food chain, and that the human form of this lethal disease is silently incubating in numerous unsuspecting beef-eaters at present.

At a few cents per pound of hamburger meat, testing costs are not a problem. However, the impacts of a thorough testing program on consumer confidence and profits would likely be disastrous, and the industry has successfully fought to keep testing low enough to make it highly unlikely that

such diseases will actually be detected. Until now.

The 1997 ban on the feeding of cows to cows in the form of meat and bone meal is a key element of the supposed "firewall" that protects U.S. herds; however, loopholes remain that are large enough to gallop a herd of steers through.

Eighteen million pounds of meat and bone meal are produced daily in the U.S., and farmers feed an average of a pound a day to dairy cows to maximize production. Since 1997, cow meat has been banned, but the enforcement of this ban is even more appalling than our downed-cow inspection system.

A recent study found that one-fifth of American feed and renderina companies had no system in place to prevent cross-contamination of cattle feed. vet the Food and Drug Administration doesn't appear to even have a complete database of the companies, let alone any credible enforcement system.

Other gaping holes in the firewall include unsalable pet food, poultry litter and restaurant leftovers, all of which may include cattle products, and all of which are fed to cows in a never-ending effort to cut costs.

A million tons of poultry litter, containing poorly digested meat meal, feces and feathers, are fed to American cows each year.

Perhaps least savory of all, spray-dried cow and pig blood is added to agricultural animal feed to provide protein, mixed into drinking water and, most commonly, used as a milk replacement for dairy calves. At least 16 studies have shown that prions may be transmitted through blood, which is why the American Red Cross no longer

accepts blood from most Western European donors.

Ending the human consumption of downed cows will go some way toward reducing public health risks and the suffering these poor animals endure. But unless and until the USDA follows Europe's lead and massively increases testing for mad cow and other dangerous diseases, and unless and until they get serious about ending the feeding of cow products to cows, chickens and pigs, their efforts will remain little more than a smokescreen designed to protect industry profits at the expense of the American public.

Dr. Andrew Knight is a Seattle-based veterinarian and consults for various animal-protection organizations in the United States and abroad.

## REFERENCED VERSION

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However, the USDA's decision will not end the risks to American consumers; not by a long way. Cows affected by mad cow disease commonly take years to display any signs at all,<sup>1</sup> let alone becoming too sick to stand, and the average American cow is slaughtered at less than two years of age, <sup>2</sup> hence the majority of mad cows will continue to

1 USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. Current Thinking on Measures that Could be Implemented to Minimize Human Exposure to

Materials that Could Potentially Contain the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy Agent. 15 January 2002

System. 1998] to between 81% and 83%[European Commission Report on

the assessment of the Geographical BSE-risk of the USA <a href="http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/sc/ssc/out113">http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/sc/ssc/out113</a> en.pdf > July 20001

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<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/bse/bse-surveillance.html>].

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We slaughter around 35 million cows annually, and last year tested a paltry 20,000 for mad cow disease, not even 1 in 1,700. In contrast, Europe tests almost a million cows each month.3 France, which has a fraction of the US cattle population, tests more cows in a week than the US tests in a decade.4 Japan, formerly the biggest US export market, tests every cow destined for human consumption, and our industry reps complain that Japan won't reopen its doors to American beef. Small wonder. Dr. Stanley Prusiner, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery of prions, those deadly microscopic invokers of mad cow disease, describes US testing as "appalling."5

[<http://europa.eu.int/comm/food
/fs/bse/testing/bse 0103 en.pdf>]

compared to our 48,000 in the entire 13 year history of the U.S.

testing program [USDA. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) Surveillance

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/i ssues/bse/bsesurveillance.html>].

by Angie Coiro.

<http://www.kqed.org/programs/pr ogramarchive.jsp?progID=RD19&Res ultStart=1&ResultCount=10&type=r adio>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Estimates of the percentage of US cattle slaughtered at less than two years of age range from 76%[USDA: Animal Disposition Reporting

<sup>3&</sup>lt;http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/
fs/bse/testing/bse 0103 en.pdf>.

France tests 75,000 cattle a week

Mad Cow Disease in Canada. May 23, 2003 9:00am KQED Forum hosted

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<sup>&</sup>lt;http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/ fs/sc/ssc/out113 en.pdf> July 2000.

<sup>8</sup> General Accounting Office. GAO Report to Congressional Requesters. January 2002 MAD COW DISEASE:

Improvements in the Animal Feed Ban and Other Regulatory Areas Would

Strengthen U.S. Prevention Efforts. GAO-02-183.

<sup>&</sup>lt;http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02183.pdf>
9 Utilization Of Poultry Litter
as Feed for Beef Cattle.
<http://www.fda.gov/ohrms/docket
s/dailys/01/Nov01/110501/ts00014

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Paul Brown. Summary of Research Findings on TSE Infectivity in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Docket No. 01-068-1 RIN 0579-AB43. Federal Register (Volume 68(2003):2704-2711.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> European Commission Report on the assessment of the Geographical BSE-risk of the USA

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Commission Health & Consumer Protection Directorate-General Scientific Steering Committee Opinion on Implications of the Recent Papers an Transmission of BSE by Blood. 13 September 2002. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/</pre> fs/bse/scientific advice08 en.ht And Hunter, N., Foster, J., Chong, A., McCutcheon, S., Parnham, D., Eaton, S., MacKenzie, C., and Houston, F., 2002. Transmission prion diseases by blood transfusion. Journal of General Virology (2002), 83: Published ahead of print (16 July 2002).

Blood. Annex 1. European