BSE Finding In Washington State Likely To Result In Market Disruptions, 
But Preventive Steps In Place To Assure Safe Beef Supply

Steve Krut (12/24/2003)

The testing of a downer cow in Washington and the anticipated confirmation that it has BSE, or the so-called “mad cow” disease, is likely to result in major market disruptions. It is anticipated that about 10% of the U.S. beef exports to the Pacific Rim will be lost for many months to come.

USDA officials are anticipated to develop a higher frequency testing program for BSE. It is not believed to manifest itself in cattle under 30 months of age. The animal tested positive was a retired dairy cow. Government officials assured the public that only the brain and spinal column in positive BSE animals are of concern and that muscle meats, including roasts, steaks and chops, are not known to pose any risk to consumers.

The area where the animal was tested positive is one that has historically seen much cross border traffic in dairy animals between the U.S. and Canada. USDA was expected to continue with plans to allow live cattle from Canada under 30-months of age to be shipped to the U.S. beginning in January. Regularly recorded updates are available on the issue on USDA's toll-free number 866-4USDA-COM. The incident is not considered to be terrorist related.

The only way BSE is known to spread is through contaminated feed. In 1997, the FDA banned feeds containing ruminant-materials and bone meal supplements to cattle. This stands as a firewall to prevent the spread of BSE to other animals.

There is no way to test for BSE in live animals, although two months ago researchers in California said they have developed such a live animal test which is expected to be on the market within a year.

All U.S. cattle sold for food must be inspected by a USDA inspector or veterinarian before going to slaughter, during slaughter, and organs are checked after slaughter to detect any animal diseases. Animals exhibiting any neurological disorder are tested for BSE. Last year, USDA tested approximately 20,000 animals for BSE The current system targets all cattle with any signs of neurological disorder as well as those over 30 months of age, as well as non-ambulatory cattle.

Consumers should continue to eat beef with confidence. All scientific studies show that the BSE infectious agent has never been found in beef muscle meat or milk and U.S. beef remains safe to eat.