

Export-ban on British beef to Europe lifted

Barry Mason
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European Agriculture Ministers voted on November 23 to lift the ban on exports of British beef. Germany, France, Spain, and Austria opposed the decision while Luxembourg abstained. The European Commission (EC) will have to rubberstamp the agreement before exports resume.

The ban on British beef was imposed on March 27, 1996, following the admission that there was a link between Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, also known as 'Mad Cow Disease') in cattle and the new variant form of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (nvCJD). To date, nvCJD, which has become known as 'Human BSE,' has killed 30 people in the United Kingdom.

Even if ratified, the EC decision does not mean a full resumption of exports. Only de-boned meat from animals born after August 1, 1996 and from cattle aged between 6 months and 30 months will be able to be exported. The August 1 cut off point is the date that a ban was introduced on the use of contaminated feed for cattle. The criterion is based on the supposition that the ban has been effective in eliminating the disease. European Union inspectors will visit every slaughterhouse wanting to apply for a licence to export beef.

One of the terms is a cull of all offspring born to cows with BSE. This is an attempt to reduce concern about transmission of BSE from cow to calf. In Britain 4,756 calves have been identified as having been born to cows that developed BSE. Of these 600 have been slaughtered. The farmer will have to show that any animal for export was from a mother that survived six months after calving without developing BSE. All cattle will have to be tagged using a computerised tracing system. The tagged cattle will then be monitored by the Cattle Movement Service, which has its headquarters in Workington, Cumbria. It is expected to be swamped by farmers wanting to register with the

service.

No export is expected to take place until the spring of 1999. Even then there will be resistance to buying British beef. In Northern Ireland the ban was lifted in June of this year because a computerised cattle-tracing system had been established. The first export of meat did not happen till September. Export volumes are around 20 to 30 tonnes a week, about 2 percent of the 1,000 tonnes a week exported before the ban.

Consumers and retailers in Europe will also be hesitant about eating British beef. One Italian butcher, interviewed on television, said he would only sell it if he were able to conceal its origin. A French butcher was quoted in the *Independent* as saying: 'I used to sell British beef but I will keep to French meat from sources I know from now on. If I have British beef in the shop, people will stop buying my other beef.'

The BSE crisis has been the biggest economic disaster in Britain since the Second World War. By the year 2000, the crisis will have cost the British taxpayer £3.7 billion in aid paid to farmers, slaughterers and renderers. In 1995 the beef market was worth £4 billion a year and the export of live calves was worth £600 million a year. After March 1996 the export trade was completely wiped out and domestic consumption fell 40 percent.

The greatest cost is human. This has been borne firstly by the victims of nvCJD and their families. John Williams, whose daughter Alison died from nvCJD, spoke on Radio 5 Live in response to the lifting of the ban. 'I would put a plea in to the farming community and also the meat producers to press for test which will confirm that beef is safe to eat,' he said. He sympathised with farmers and laid the main blame on the previous Tory government. 'I think the last government has a lot to answer for'.

There has been a rising toll of suicides among farmers whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the

emergence of BSE, which greatly exacerbated the general economic crisis facing British farming.

The risk of people contracting nvCJD has not ended. There have been about 1,800 cases of BSE among cattle in Britain this year. There is concern that many people could be carrying nvCJD but not yet showing symptoms. A major concern is that some of these people may be donating blood and passing the disease on to the recipients. There are over 300,000 blood transfusions a year. An analysis of tissue samples of people who have undergone routine appendix and tonsillitis removal is under way. It is hoped that this may give some indication as to the level of infection of nvCJD within the human population.

The government is looking at beginning trials of a drug called Pentosan, which has been shown to reverse the prion protein deformation associated with nvCJD and other spongiform diseases. It is thought that the deformed prion molecules clump in the brain and lead to the horrific brain damage and death. Chris Bostock, the director of the Institute of Animal Health, has called for further tests to be carried out. Dr Stephen Dealler is currently advising the government about the possibilities of using the drug to counteract the effects of nvCJD.

Peter Scott of the Federation of Fresh Meat Wholesalers said 'there are about 6,000 to 8,000 cattle whose mothers died of BSE after calving'. Asked if he thought some of these calves--with a risk of carrying BSE--could be entering the food chain he confirmed that 'they could'. The government is also concerned about the possibility of sheep having contracted BSE and is expected to make a statement shortly.

It is clear that the BSE epidemic in Britain, although in decline, is not over. To date 99.7 percent of all cases of BSE in Europe have occurred in Britain, but there is evidence of increasing numbers in other parts of Europe such as Portugal. A report in *New Scientist* magazine in June this year gave a picture of the situation in Switzerland. Prionics, a Zurich company, has been able to develop a sensitive diagnostic test for the presence of BSE infection in cattle, which although carrying the disease do not display the symptoms. The results of the tests show that for every one cow displaying BSE symptoms, a hundred are actually carrying the disease. This would mean that in Britain last year the number of cattle carrying the disease would have been about

450,000.

The economic crisis in British farming that BSE brought to a head is continuing. The lifting of the beef export ban will have little impact on this process. A NatWest bank report estimates that 25,000, or 15 percent of full-time producers will leave the industry in the coming period. Their income is lower in real terms today than 60 years ago. Incomes fell by half in 1997 and are expected to fall by a further two-thirds this year. The price farmers got for beef fell by 35 percent over the last two years whilst that of milk and chicken fell by 22 percent. Weather-patterns disrupted by the El Nino effect and the collapse of markets in Russia have added to the problems faced by farmers. Subsidies paid out to farmers under the Common Agriculture Policy which keep many farmers afloat will come under attack in the coming period. The BSE crisis expresses in a nutshell the economic, social and environmental catastrophe brought about by the profit system.

See Also:

Documents of the Workers Inquiry into Human BSE convened by the Socialist Equality Party of Britain



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