France announces measures to prevent spread of BSE/Mad Cow Disease

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French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has announced a moratorium on the use of animal products in livestock feed and a ban on T-bone steaks, in an attempt to allay public concern over the rise in cases of BSE, or Mad Cow Disease.

There will also be random testing of cattle entering slaughterhouses and increased funding for research into BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) and its human form, variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (vCJD)—the brain wasting illness that has killed over 80 people in Britain, two in France and one in Italy.

Reported cases of BSE in France have tripled since last year, and stand at 94.

The use of meat and bone meal in cattle feed has been banned in France since 1990, but could still be used for other livestock. The ban on T-bone steaks is intended to prevent consumption of cattle vertebrae, where the BSE infection is believed to be concentrated. The Agriculture Ministry earlier announced a one-year ban on the sale of sweetbreads (Bull's testicles).

Jospin's announcement was forced on him in face of the growing concerns of French citizens regarding BSE and its dangers.

Alarm spread after last month's revelation that eight tonnes of potentially BSE-contaminated beef had been sold to supermarkets. Beef sales have plummeted and schools and restaurants across France have taken beef or beef-on-the bone off the menu. Several countries have placed restrictions on the import of French beef.

The French farmers' union last week called for the slaughter of all cattle born before 1996—the ones most likely to have come into contact with infected feed—but also the least commercially valuable. Agriculture Minister Jean Glavany rejected the proposal as too costly and that it could create “psychosis" among consumers.

The French government has, however, been forced to ask scientists to study the possibility that BSE/vCJD can be transmitted by blood transfusions or by eating red meat. In Britain, where the BSE epidemic originated, the government has claimed continually that the disease cannot be transmitted through consuming animal muscle tissue. The Institute of Animal Health in Edinburgh announced in September that they had been able to infect a sheep with BSE through a blood transfusion from another sheep carrying the disease but displaying none of the symptoms.

Last week, the Swiss Red Cross announced it would be severely limiting blood donations from people who had spent time in Britain between 1980 and 1996. It is the first such ban to be introduced in Europe and will affect around two thousand blood donors in Switzerland.

The BSE crisis is now affecting countries throughout Europe. Switzerland has the highest number of BSE cases in Europe after Britain. Officials in Geneva announced an immediate ban on beef in the city's schools and nurseries after the discovery of two new cases of BSE. In 1996, the government introduced a ban on using animal remains in cattle feed but cows born since then have been found to be infected with BSE. The Federal Department of Agriculture and Swiss farmers also want a complete ban on using animal remains in all types of feed.

Spain has said it was banning imports of French and Irish cattle more than 20-months-old and restrictions on imports from France are also in place in Russia.

Italy has said it will impose a ban on French beef unless there is an urgent meeting of the European Union's veterinary committee. Agriculture Minister Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio said, “If the committee doesn't meet as soon as possible, the Italian government

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could decide to block the importation of beef at risk."

The European Commission in Brussels now plans to extend its screening programme for BSE to millions of older cattle throughout Europe. Testing could be applied to all slaughtered cattle aged 30 months plus, old enough to show clinical symptoms of BSE, which has a long incubation period. This will be subject to agreement by a meeting of experts from 15 European nations next week. The European Union is also making 60 million euros available to prop up the French beef industry in the face of collapsing prices.

See Also:

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[9 November 2000]

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