

France gripped by fear of deaths from Mad Cow Disease

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There is growing public concern that France could face an epidemic of the deadly brain-wasting disease variant Creutzfeldt Jacobs Disease (vCJD), the human form of BSE or Mad Cow Disease.

Two people have died of CJD in France—much less than the 80 fatalities in Britain but still the second highest in the world. So far this year more than 80 cases of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) have been diagnosed, more than twice as many as the 31 cases last year. More worrying still the government admits there are 50,000 “mysterious deaths” in cattle every year.

In response to growing criticism, the government tightened safety checks and testing of cattle in June. But this failed to allay the fears of French families because of high profile reports of cheating by some cattle dealers and breeders.

Some of France's most popular supermarket chains, led by Carrefour, recently admitted that a tonne of BSE-infected meat had been sold to customers after it got through the safety checks at an abattoir. Around 10 makers of tripe and animal feed received offal and meat products from the same BSE-tainted herd. This week a father and son were arrested after trying to sell a BSE infected cow for slaughter.

In consequence, beef consumption has plummeted. The national restaurant chain *Buffalo Grill* withdrew beef on the bone from its menus and butchers and some other restaurants followed suit. Beef has been removed from kindergarden and school menus throughout Paris, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Caen and Cherbourg.

Abattoirs have registered a 30 to 50 percent drop in beef sales, while supermarkets say that sales are down by between 25-40 percent. Michel Prost, director of meat and livestock cooperatives' federation FNCBV, estimates beef sales were down by 15 percent in

butchers' shops and prices for beef carcasses have fallen by at least 10 percent.

The government has attempted to reassure the public that it is combating the problem, but with little success.

Agriculture Minister Jean Glavany told the media that it was discussing the possibility of the total removal of the spinal column of cattle from the food chain with the food safety authority AFSSA, because it is believed to be the most infective tissue. It has also asked AFSSA to investigate the possible dangers presented by beef on the bone.

Gaullist President Jacques Chirac deepened the crisis facing the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin, when he demanded an immediate end to sales of meat and bone meal from the carcasses of cows for use as feed for poultry and pigs. Feed containing cow remains is already banned for use in cattle, but permitted for other species.

Public confidence in the government's reassurances was further undermined by the admission of Junior Health Minister Dominique Gillot, who admitted on November 7, “With the number of cases of mad cow disease increasing in France, it is very probable that we are going to see several dozen cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob... We've got to be prepared for that.”

Gillot said that a third case of vCJD in a young man was “very probable”. The number of people displaying symptoms of the disease was already on the rise, she said.

The economic consequences of the question mark now placed over France's beef industry are potentially disastrous. France is Europe's biggest beef exporter and led the campaign to bar British beef from Europe because of the risk from BSE. Now a ban on French beef has been imposed by Hungary and Poland, while Russia has stopped imports of cattle from western parts

of France that are deemed most at risk from BSE.

Farmers have called for an aid package from the government to save them from bankruptcy, with the head of the FNSEA farmers' union, Luc Guyau, warning that, "We are on the edge of a precipice... Some farmers could be driven to suicide."

Cases of BSE have also been reported in Belgium, Denmark, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and Ireland —with the latter three countries admitting to the highest incidence after Britain. In August this year an Italian man died of vCJD in a Rome hospital.



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