

BSE/"mad cow disease" crisis spreads throughout Europe

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23 January 2001

Cases of BSE have now been identified in 10 of the 15 European Union (EU) countries, as well as Switzerland and Liechtenstein, which are not members. Although incidences are still relatively few in number, the discovery of the disease across the continent has had a dramatic effect on beef consumption, which has fallen by 27 percent across the EU.

Along with a rise in the number of cattle infected with BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), the number of people who have died from its human equivalent, variant Creutzfeldt Jacobs Disease (vCJD), is also growing. By the end of last year nearly 90 people had either died or were dying from the fatal brain-wasting disease in the UK; with the yearly number rising from 15 in 1999 to 25 in 2000. A further six suspicious cases are also under investigation. Deaths from vCJD have also been reported in France and Italy.

Over 160 cases of BSE were diagnosed last year, more than five times as many as the 31 cases the previous year. The government has also admitted there are some 50,000 "mysterious deaths" in cattle every year. As a result, beef sales have dropped by more than 25 percent and beef has been removed from the menu in school canteens in several French cities.

Besides the health concerns, farmers have also protested as the shortfall in BSE testing facilities has led to large stockpiles of beef building up that cannot be sold until it is passed fit.

The crisis could yet have far greater political ramifications. Police raided three government ministries last week on the orders of an investigating magistrate. Judge Bertella-Geffroy ordered the raids to seek evidence that senior officials knowingly allowed consumers to risk exposure to vCJD. She launched her investigation following the lodging of official complaints of "poisoning" by the families of two French vCJD victims. Judge Bertella-Geffroy had also led the inquiry into the HIV-tainted blood scandal in the 1980s, when around 4,000 to 5,000 people, many of them haemophiliacs, were infected with supplies from the national blood bank. Former Socialist Party Prime Minister Laurent Fabius and two other ministers faced manslaughter charges for their role in the scandal. (A specially created court later acquitted them.)

Sales of MacDonalds burgers in France have been hit by the growing BSE crisis, down by 47 percent over the same week in November 1999. With profits for 2000 down, the global burger chain has embarked on an extensive advertising campaign across the continent, where it makes fully 25 percent of all its sales, to try and maintain its market position.

The number of cases of BSE reported in Ireland is rising. There have been 580 confirmed cases since 1989, with 149 last year alone.

A number of abattoirs have been discovered leaving high-risk

material on carcasses passed for human consumption. The spinal cord, brain, and other offal are potentially much more infective than other parts of the animal—by a factor of up to 1,000. An EU ban on "specified risk" materials means they have to be removed before the meat can enter the human food chain.

However, an audit of 96 of the country's 360 abattoirs found 18 (nearly 20 percent) that were not complying with the EU regulation, and as a result three were closed down.

BSE-infected carcasses and the high-risk material removed in the abattoirs are supposed to be destroyed in special high-temperature incinerators. However, Irish farmer's estimate that three more incinerator plants would be required to process the quantities of material presently accumulating and to prevent a dangerous build up.

In Northern Ireland, 41 tonnes of German beef was seized from two Newry processing facilities when it was discovered to contain spinal cord, banned since last October. The meat was apparently being processed in Newry prior to shipping back to Germany.

The first case of BSE in a domestically bred cow was reported in November last year. Since then a further 21 cases have been confirmed.

So far, the political fall-out from the BSE crisis has been greatest in Germany. Earlier this month, Health Minister Andrea Fischer (Green Party) and Agriculture Minister Karl-Heinz Funke (Social Democratic Party) resigned, as the number of BSE cases rose. Funke had admitted failing to take any action, despite being presented with a report in March 2000 predicting BSE in the German herd.

According to *Die Welt* newspaper, in a letter to the EU Consumer Protection Commissioner, Germany's new Agriculture Minister Renate Künast has admitted that a German BSE epidemic on the scale of the UK's could be possible.

The new Consumer Protection Ministry (specially created as a result of the crisis) has confirmed that the "quick" BSE tests introduced in Germany for all cattle over 30 months old destined for human consumption do not always provide conclusive results. Newsweekly *Der Spiegel* said two of the new tests had returned negative results, although the cow was infected with BSE. The laboratory that conducted the tests has blamed the poor quality of the samples it was provided.

A poll last week showed that more than 50 percent of those questioned had little or no confidence in the safety of German beef products. The polling organisation GfK said beef consumption had plummeted, with households buying 59 percent less beef in November 2000 than in the same period the year before. In the northernmost state of Schleswig Holstein, where the first BSE case was discovered, the figure was 80 percent.

As a result, some 5,000 workers in the meat processing industry have been placed on short-time working. Major meat processors Nordfleisch and Moxel report sales down 20-30 percent in November last year, leading to cuts in working hours in their plants. The crisis has badly hit German *wurst* or sausage sales. Christian Zorn, one of the country's 15,000 medium-sized producers said that if sales fell any further, some 10,000 butchers could be out of a job.

Last week, Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato appealed for "calm" as it was expected tests would confirm the country's first home-grown BSE case. Despite his efforts to shore up the Italian beef industry, domestic meat sales have dropped by 40 percent. As elsewhere, the initial reaction from the beef industry and government has been to claim it was a "foreign" problem. Cremonini, Italy's largest meat processor, boasted "Italian meat—safe and guaranteed" only days before a case of BSE was confirmed at one of its slaughterhouses this month.

Health Minister Umberto Veronesi tried to play down the implications of the BSE crisis, saying "Italian meat is safer than it was five or 10 years ago and that is a certainty for consumers".

The first BSE case was reported in November last year. The government, which has now established a special committee to monitor BSE, has since admitted the disease may be more widespread than it first admitted. Five confirmed cases so far have also caused beef sales to drop by 25 percent.

Farmers held protests last week in 11 of the country's autonomous regions, calling for compensation. Regional authorities are struggling to cope, with a shortage of veterinarians trained to identify the disease and only two national laboratories able to conduct the new BSE tests ordered by the EU. There is also a severe shortage of incinerating plants to destroy potentially contagious carcasses and other material. The only such plant in Galicia, one of the country's largest meat producing regions, broke down last week. Agriculture Secretary Castor Gago then ordered cattle carcasses awaiting incineration to be thrown down a disused mine shaft. This practice was only stopped when local residents complained of the stench. In Avila, 100km northwest of the capital Madrid, two suspect carcasses were found on a local rubbish tip.

The normally pro-government *El Mundo* newspaper has called for the Health and Agriculture ministers to resign. The paper accused the two of denying the threat from BSE in Spain.

The UK still remains the single largest source of BSE, with 1,277 cases confirmed last year. This brings the total number of cattle identified with the disease since 1987 to over 180,000.

In a related development, hundreds of haemophiliacs, who require blood-clotting agents produced from donated blood/plasma, have been warned they may have been infected with vCJD. Bio Products Laboratory confirmed that a person who donated blood in 1997 has been diagnosed with vCJD. Because of the potential risk, blood plasma for British haemophiliacs has been sourced in the USA since 1998.

The families of vCJD, or "Human BSE", victims finally look set to receive compensation, in some cases years after they have lost their loved ones to the protracted and harrowing disease. Interim payments of up to £25,000 (\$37,000) could be made but with the final scale of the epidemic still an unknown factor—estimates vary from a few hundred to 250,000—the government has been reluctant to agree to any open-ended commitment.

Elsewhere on the continent, the new EU tests have shown that the incidence of BSE in Belgium is five times higher than previous

estimates, with 19 cases confirmed so far. The agriculture ministry has said incineration plants are now "saturated" and cannot process any more cattle.

The first suspected case has also been reported in Austria.

The first diagnosis of BSE was made in November 1986 at Britain's Central Veterinary Laboratory. Although the two cows concerned were from different parts of the country, they displayed the same abnormal neurological symptoms, identified as a spongy-like degeneration of the brain.

When the BSE crisis first broke out in the UK, butchers' shops on the continent put up signs saying, "no British beef sold here." European governments reacted with a mixture of nationalism, extolling the virtues and safety of their own beef, and then banning British imports.

However, a general relaxation of safety-critical standards combined with the domination of farming by massive agribusiness is not a purely British affair. This is particularly so in Europe, where the Common Agricultural Policy provides billions in subsidies to protect European farming.

The BSE crisis was both foreseeable and preventable. Its origins lie in the intensified production methods introduced in the mid 1980s, and particularly the practice of adding meat and bone meal to animal feeds. Once cattle that had succumbed to BSE were ground up and used in such high-protein food additives, a cycle was established that ensured the disease multiplied throughout the national herd.

Meat and bone meal additives have been banned in Britain since the 1990s (as were the "specified risk" materials) but continued to be exported abroad for some time. The EU has only imposed a temporary six-month ban in December last year, with no indication if it will be made permanent.

The EU Commission overhauled food safety mechanisms in the late 1990s, in the wake of the British BSE crisis but although the new procedures may bring to light more cases of BSE the Commission has no powers of enforcement. Agricultural policy is still a nationally guarded preserve. As an article in Britain's *Financial Times* newspaper noted, the "first response [by governments] to outbreaks of BSE elsewhere is not to step up their own safety inspection procedures but to launch campaigns urging consumers at home to boycott foreign beef."

There are plans to establish an EU food safety authority, but it will only be an advisory body and is not expected to come into operation for more than 10 years.

The BSE crisis is only the most critical in a long line of food safety scandals, which include salmonella and e-coli and have cost countless lives. As the BSE scandal now spreads across Europe, it confirms tragically that as long as food production and safety are subordinated to the profit system and the market, then public health will continue to suffer.



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