

Growing concern about "Mad Cow Disease" in the US

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2 February 2001

More than 1,200 head of cattle in Texas were quarantined last week for fear of exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), commonly known as "mad cow disease". The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is investigating whether the feedlot eaten by the cattle contained meat-and-bone meal made from other ruminant animals. St. Louis-based Purina Mills Inc. confirmed that its feed mill in Gonzales, Texas manufactured the questionable feed.

BSE is the result of cows eating the remains of other infected animals, particularly brain and spinal cord material. Since 1997 FDA regulations have banned the use of beef byproducts in feed for cattle or sheep. Purina claimed that the recalled feed was not intended for the cattle. Cow byproducts are not illegal in swine and poultry feed. In fact, the use of bovine ingredients, both domestic and imported, is unregulated for any other application, such as cosmetics and dietary supplements.

BSE, which emerged in British cattle in the 1980s, has been spreading and cases of the disease have so far been identified in 10 European Union (EU) countries, as well as Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Its human equivalent, variant Creutzfeldt-Jacobs Disease (vCJD), is a brain-wasting disease with no effective treatment or cure. The highest concentration of deaths from vCJD has been in the UK, but Italy and France have recently reported fatalities.

A warning was issued January 26 by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) urging all countries, not only those in Western Europe, to be concerned about the risk of BSE and vCJD: "There is an increasingly grave situation developing in the European Union, with BSE being identified in cattle in several member states of the EU which have, until recently, been regarded as free from the disease.

Confirmed and suspected cases of vCJD are occurring in people outside the UK, in various member states." According to the UN agency press release: "All countries which have imported cattle or meat and bone meal (MBM) from western Europe, particularly the UK, during and since the 1980s, can be considered at risk from the disease."

The US government claims it has been erecting a series of "firewalls" against the threat of BSE. It has stopped imports of beef from countries where cows have been diagnosed with BSE, regulated against the use of cow byproducts in cattle feed and instituted a ban prohibiting blood donation from anyone who has spent an extended amount of time in certain European countries. But there are many loopholes in these preventive efforts. One of the most obvious is the variety of ways infected material can enter the country. An example was cited at a recent meeting of an FDA advisory committee: a package from overseas marked "pesticide" was found to contain meat and bone meal intended as a deer-repellent. In New York City health officials are investigating sales in the city of a German-made candy recalled in Poland on January 22, amid fears it contained a beef-based gelatin from BSE-infected cattle.

Scientist Michael Hansen of Consumers Union, an advocacy group in Yonkers, New York, says that potentially dangerous meat products containing brain and spinal cord material from cattle are still produced and used in this country because they are only banned in cattle feed. He also points out that the feed ban does not include blood products, "so cow's blood products can be fed back to cattle. We know infectious material can be found in blood and plasma." Another indirect route to cattle, he says, is through pigs: "We know cattle can be fed to pigs and pigs can be fed to cattle."

He also suspects that “mad cow-like disease” is surfacing in the deer and elk population, and is concerned about another home-grown malady of the same general variety, scrapie in sheep.

In addition to the apparent cracks in the regulatory firewalls, the enforcement of the regulations in place are also at issue. The FDA reported earlier in January that inspections of rendering plants and feed mills found nearly a quarter of the sites were not properly labeling banned animal remains, nor were there measures in place to keep such material from entering the food chain.



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