

# BSE / "Mad Cow Disease" spreading in Spain

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Forty-three animals infected with BSE, or "Mad Cow Disease," have so far been registered in Spain. According to official information provided by the department of agriculture and fisheries, 33 of these are concentrated in the north-west area of Galicia. The others are in Asturias/Basque Country (6 cases), Barcelona (2) and the Balearic Islands (2). The cases were reported between November 22, 2000 and April 3 this year.

Some experts believe that the number of BSE cases in Spain will rise to more than 250 by the end of this year. The most conservative assumptions predict that there will be a minimum of 3,500 cases in the course of this decade. However these predictions are based on the present level of known infections, which is about one positive case per thousand animals tested.

Scientists believe a prion protein agent, which produces holes or lesions in the brain, causes Mad Cow Disease. BSE and its human equivalent, variant Creutzfeldt Jacobs Disease (vCJD), lead to a "wasting away" of the brain, inevitably ending in death.

Human BSE has already claimed 92 victims in the UK, three in France and one in Ireland; most of these being mainly young people. No cases of vCJD have so far been notified in Spain. Although the mother of Javier Monge, who died last year, claims that her son showed symptoms of the disease. Monge had lived in the UK for 16 months and was admitted to the Doce de Octubre hospital in Madrid in May last year with symptoms that were compatible with CJD.

BSE was first recognised in Britain in the early 1980s (although reputable microbiologists consider it to have been present for two or three decades before that), and soon spread to Ireland. Changes in the rendering industry, and the increased use of animal protein in cattle feed are thought to have exacerbated the spread of the disease in the UK.

The European Union (EU) imposed a ban on British

beef to supposedly prevent BSE from infecting cattle on the continent.

However, nearly twenty years on, the disease is now spreading throughout Europe. The first cases outside of Britain and Ireland were registered in Portugal and Switzerland in 1990, followed by France in 1991, Germany, Denmark and Luxembourg in 1992. At present, the other European countries most affected are Portugal (538 cases), Switzerland (366) and France (279), followed by Germany (55), Spain (43), Belgium (23), Holland (14) and Italy (7).

The Spanish government now stands accused of delaying tactics. The first Spanish cow reported with BSE symptoms was "Elvira," which died in August last year. By October, the government knew it had been affected by BSE but did not confirm this until December. The family who owned the cow has accused the regional government in Galicia of having pressurised them for at least two months to keep quiet about the case.

But even more damning is the fact that for several years agriculture ministers in Madrid had blocked measures proposed by the EU to stiffen controls against BSE. Together with Germany, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, Finland and Greece (although many of these later changed their position), Spain refused to ban parts of the animal known to be the most infective—such as the brain, spinal cord, tonsils and intestines of animals over one year old—from entering the human food chain. This was the still case last June, when Prime Minister Aznar, in response to a question by the leader of the social democratic PSOE in parliament, demanded that people "should not generate alarm, since the situation in Spain was under control". Ministers argued that to implement such a ban, which had been demanded by the European Commission since 1996, was a discriminatory measure against countries such as Spain. The ban already in place in the United Kingdom could

not be extended to the rest of the EU, because countries like Spain were free of the epidemic, they contended.

Even the few controls that were introduced in Spain regarding the use of animal feeds containing meat and bone meal products were not enforced. Similarly, the ban on imported cattle from Portugal, where BSE had become more widespread, was being broken in hundreds of ways. The border between Spain and Portugal is 1,215 kilometres long, it comprises an extensive territory marked often only by posts. Spanish abattoirs are used to slaughter many Portuguese cattle. Some Spanish farmers buy land in Portugal for their cattle to graze, because they enjoy better subsidies and other fiscal advantages there. Many have admitted they bought animal feed in Portugal, since it was much cheaper there.

Once the cases of BSE could no longer be hidden, the Spanish government said it would finance 40 percent of the emergency measures, seek EU funding to match its contribution, and ask the regional administrations to foot 15 percent of the bill, with farmers contributing the remaining 5 percent. However, it has levied a special tax on all meat products—not just beef—to pay the estimated 60 billion pesetas (\$321 million) cost of dealing with the outbreak of BSE.

Spain is presently poorly equipped to face a BSE epidemic. Few veterinarian laboratories are equipped to carry out tests for the disease, and there are only five incinerators capable of disposing of contagious material, and one of these is out of commission. Breeders complain of too little compensation and there are fears that falsified ear tags are being used to conceal the true age and provenance of cattle. In Galicia, cattle rustlers have continued to trade across the border with Portugal. The regional authorities are struggling to comply with new EU directives on the testing of cattle and for the disposal of hazardous animal waste. BSE infected carcasses can often be found in the countryside, or buried in shallow graves. The majority of stock breeding companies are not complying with the regulations to control the disease. Of 2,500 inspections carried out up to January 15 this year, 2,000 infringements of the regulations to combat BSE were reported and at least 7 people were imprisoned as a result.

Moreover, Spain is divided into 17 autonomous regions, making the co-ordination of the anti-BSE

measures and controlling the epidemic extremely difficult. The crisis has already claimed several political scalps. Castor Gago, Agriculture Secretary in Galicia, resigned after it emerged that the regional government was throwing diseased carcasses down a mineshaft, instead of disposing of them properly. Farmers have blocked slaughterhouses and meat packing plants across Spain to protest against the lack of government help to deal with BSE.



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