

Britain: Food Agency plays Russian roulette with BSE/Mad Cow Disease

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The British Food Standards Agency (FSA) has recommended that the government abolish the Over Thirty Month (OTM) rule under which only cattle under 30 months of age are permitted to enter the human food chain. The rule was originally introduced to prevent cattle that were incubating the brain wasting disease, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), passing it on to humans who ate their meat.

The rule was based on the time taken for the disease to manifest itself in an animal, usually around five years. It presumed that younger animals could be considered free of the disease and safe for human consumption.

BSE, or Mad Cow Disease, has been identified as the cause of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) in humans. To date nearly 140 people have died as a result of contracting this brain wasting disease. Unlike the previously known form of CJD the new variant has affected mainly young people. It has no cure and is fatal.

BSE broke out in British cattle in the late 1980s. The then Tory Government denied that there was any danger to humans because the disease could not cross the species barrier. The spectacle of Tory Agricultural Minister John Gummer force feeding his daughter a hamburger as a testament to the safety of eating beef, endures as a symbol of the lies and cover up that was created in an attempt to defend the interests of the then very profitable British beef export industry.

Eventually, in the light of mounting evidence and the rise in the number of young people dying from vCJD, the government was forced to admit the connection between BSE in cattle and the fatal brain wasting disease and measures were introduced to prevent the disease entering the food chain. Besides the OTM rule, the measures included removing from slaughtered cattle specified offal and brain tissue where the main concentration of the prion protein--the BSE causative agents--gathered and a ban on the feeding of meat and bone meal to ruminants. These combined measures were put into effect in August 1996.

Meat and bone meal was considered to have been the root of spread of the disease. It was made from the ground up remains of dead animals, including cattle, which were made into animal food pellets.

The crisis led to the incoming Blair Labour government abolishing the discredited Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and creating the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and a supposedly independent Food

Standards Agency.

In July 2002, the FSA undertook a review of the OTM ruling and presented its proposals to a stakeholder group in March this year. Whilst this stakeholder group includes representatives of victims of the human form of BSE, it is dominated by business interests. On 10 July the FSA announced its recommendations.

The FSA has proposed to the government that the OTM rule be abandoned. It recommends that from January 2004 any cattle born after August 1996, i.e., the date of the ban on the feeding of bone meal to cattle, be allowed into the human food chain. From July 2005 cattle of any age will be allowed to enter the human food chain. It is proposed that cattle slaughtered for human consumption be tested for signs of BSE.

The main driving force behind the proposals is money. The current scheme costs nearly £400 million a year to run and the cost is met by the government. The FSA estimates the replacement scheme will cost just £60 million a year to fund.

Basing themselves on a risk assessment published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, the FSA estimate that abolishing the OTM ruling would lead to an increase of between one and two and a half extra deaths from vCJD as a result of infected meat being eaten, a price it considers worth paying to restore the beef industry's profitability.

The recommendations have been challenged and opposed by different bodies and individuals.

The Consumers' Association (CA), an independent watchdog body, published a response to the FSA proposals on July 11. They welcomed the fact that the FSA had included a caveat that the proposed changes go ahead providing that DEFRA can show the testing of slaughtered cattle is effective. However, they are concerned that there are still unanswered questions about such tests.

The CA expresses concern about how the testing system will operate. They call on DEFRA to run a pilot study to "focus on... the reliability of the tests and how early in the incubation period they can pick up BSE, and the way in which positive cases will be removed from slaughterhouse without causing risks of further contamination."

They are concerned that DEFRA is proposing that the samples for testing will be taken by slaughter-house operatives rather than staff from the government Meat Hygiene service.

At the height of the BSE crisis in Britain concerns were raised that meat inspectors, then employed by local government, came

under intense pressure, including physical threats, for attempting to apply the inadequate measures then in force. Any self-policed testing and isolation measures to deal with meat found to be BSE infected would be open to abuse and corruption.

The CA is also concerned that the abolition of the OTM rule will create an environment in which BSE is no longer considered a priority.

The Food Commission, a food watchdog body independent of government and business, issued a comprehensive list of concerns in June this year. They had taken up the FSA's invitation "to contribute to the discussion" on the proposed ending of the OTM rule.

They take issue with the FSA's model of the future numbers of vCJD cases. They state the model is a revision downwards of the possible cases of vCJD based on the study of appendix tissues and on the latest vCJD mortality data. The testing of over 8,000 human appendices gave a positive indication of vCJD in one case. They point out this represents a total of 5,000 cases in a population of 40 million, but explain that "appendices are not the best match for vCJD", explaining that some people diagnosed with vCJD have not shown a positive appendix tissue test.

On the vCJD mortality rate they point out that there has been a slight increase so far this year. Whereas in 2002 it was 1.4 cases per month (cpm), down from 1.7 cpm in 2000, so far in 2003 (January-May) it is running at 2 cpm.

They take issue with the model's assumption of a 12-year incubation for vCJD in humans. They point out that in Kuru cases in Papua New Guinea the incubation period was around 30 years. Kuru, a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy, was a result of the local custom of eating the brains of deceased relatives.

Assuming a 25- to 30-year incubation period, the Food Commission states this would mean present cases of vCJD are the result of "just a few infected animals entering the food supply in the mid 1970s (an early phase of the BSE recycling)". This would have enormous implications for the lifting of the OTM rule. They call for "an open debate with scientific critics" in order to determine the robustness of the vCJD forecasting models and the effects of removing the OTM rules.

They highlight the high levels of BSE still prevalent in older cattle. At the height of the disease in 1992/93 there were around 37,000 cases a year. The number last year was under 600 and so far this year just over 300. Figures for 2003 show that one in 1,000 cattle born before the bone meal feed ban of 1996 tested positive for the disease.

For cattle born after the July 1997, the infection figure is one in 10,000. This is highly significant because these animals were born after the bone meal feed ban came into force. They call for a thorough research programme to establish accurately the level of BSE in cattle before any consideration of ending the OTM rule. Currently the UK only test around 20,000 cattle per month compared to around 200,000 in France and Germany.

They also call for the list of specified risk material (SRM) to be increased. SRMs are tissues such as brain. The Food Commission states German research shows tissue such as the autonomic nervous system, especially where it runs adjacent to other risk material tissue such as brainstem or oesophagus, should also be

considered SRM. Such tissue would present a higher risk in older cattle where the likelihood of infection is higher.

Tim Lobstein, director of the Food Commission, said, "Past predictions on BSE and CJD have proved to be wrong and we are unhappy that this decision is being made on the basis of a single model from Imperial College suggesting only one or two cases of CJD will arise. We want the model to be tested to destruction before they act on it. We reacted to foot and mouth disease on the basis of one model, with disastrous results. They are looking at saving money. The BSE scandal cost £13 billion."

A recent *New Scientist* article stated, "One key uncertainty is how many cases of vCJD results from a given amount of BSE exposure. Other uncertainties are the sensitivity of the BSE tests and the likelihood that cattle incubating BSE will be sent for slaughter just before they show obvious symptoms." Currently tests can only be carried out on cattle once they have been slaughtered. Research is being carried out to be able to test animals prior to slaughter. In the *Guardian* newspaper, Michael Clinton a researcher at the prestigious Roslin animal research Institute in Edinburgh said, "It's really [about] finding a suitable marker in the blood. The standard tests on brain detect a disease-specific form of the prion protein and there's not enough of that anywhere but the brain to be useable in a test."

Meat from cattle older than 30 months would be held in storage at the slaughterhouse whilst the tests are done. Test results would be known within 48 hours and the meat released for consumption if tests had proved negative. This process raises many concerns, such as how thorough a decontamination of slaughter lines would follow a positive finding and the whole process would be open to evasion and shortcuts.

The British National Farmers Union (NFU) has welcomed the FSA recommendation. The NFU chairman Sir Ben Gill said, "Its recommendation gives a further significant stamp of approval for British beef."

Don Simms, a Belfast businessman whose son Jonathon has vCJD, condemned the plans. The family had to resort to court action to allow their son to be treated with the drug Pentosan Polysulphate. This drug had not undergone safety trials but Don Simms won the right to have Jonathon treated for what so far has been a fatal disease. To date the drug treatment appears to have halted the progress of the disease.

Don Simms said; "Money has been put before human life here. The Food Standards Agency was set up to protect UK citizens from falling ill. Does that remit not include the 2.5 people they predict will succumb to this evil disease? This is Russian roulette and for those people who have had to endure watching their loved ones dying of vCJD it is not acceptable."



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