

Beef industry, federal regulators long ignored warnings

# Mad cow discovery punctures myth of US “firewall” against disease

Tom Carter, Jerry Isaacs  
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The first case in the United States of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE—otherwise known as “mad cow” disease) was discovered in a Washington state dairy cow on December 23, 2003. Within days, dozens of countries that buy US beef banned imports, including Russia, Mexico, Japan and South Korea, bringing the \$3.2 billion export industry to a halt.

When the disease first appeared in Britain in the mid-1980s, dozens of humans contracted variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob’s Disease (vCJD), the human prion disease caused by BSE, after eating contaminated meat. More than 140 people have died in Britain and Europe from the disease.

In a flurry of public statements reminiscent of the 1990 comments by the British agricultural minister—who said he had no qualms about his small child eating a hamburger—the US Department of Agriculture secretary Ann Veneman urged Americans to continue to eat beef regardless of the findings, saying the discovery of BSE posed no serious health danger. President Bush himself was tapped on New Year’s Day to join the chorus of voices trying to prop up the beef industry.

But on what grounds were all the reassurances based? Contrary to suggestions by industry spokesmen, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the media, precious little testing for BSE is actually done in the US. The USDA performed random BSE tests on approximately 0.03 percent of all slaughtered cattle in 2003—only 20,000 cows were tested out of the nearly 40 million head of cattle slaughtered last year.

The detection of the infected cow at Vern’s Moses Lake Meats in Moses Lake, Washington, was more or less accidental. The six-year-old Holstein had been flagged by a federal inspector because of its inability to walk, which was the result of an injury during calving some years back, but not because of any visible signs of BSE. In fact, the USDA inspector at the slaughterhouse determined that the cow “was not diseased, paralyzed or suffering from a neurological condition” such as mad cow disease, and was thereby fit for human consumption.

It was not until 13 days after the cow was slaughtered and processed that test results showed its brain tissue contained BSE prions (the infectious agent). By that time, the infected meat had been mixed in with at least 10,000 pounds of beef from other cattle slaughtered with it on December 9, and it had ended up in meat aisles, in refrigerators and on dinner plates in eight US states and Guam.

Inspectors were also lucky that the infected animal had a plastic tag on its ear identifying its farm of origin. According to federal meat inspectors, many farmers have cattle without tags or whose tags have fallen off during transport or other activities. If that had happened, the cow’s identity might never have been known.

Several weeks after the infected cow’s origin was discovered, USDA investigators have not been able to track down and quarantine more than

80 other animals that shared the same feed with the animal in its early years on an Alberta, Canada, farm. It is widely believed that BSE-tainted feed was the source of contamination.

The human disease caused by BSE—variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob’s Disease—is in a league of its own among food-borne illness in that it is not caused by bacteria, and consequently cannot be cooked out of the food or treated with antibiotics. Instead, BSE is caused by an abnormal protein that gradually replicates its abnormalities in other healthy proteins it encounters—primarily in the brain and central nervous system of cows, sheep, pigs, deer and other animals.

Over time, these abnormal proteins eat small holes in the brain—hence the “spongiform encephalopathies” one sees in a thin layer of affected brain tissue under the microscope. When this cell loss intensifies, especially in the vicinity of the cerebral cortex, it affects motor skills, cognitive skills and perceptive capacities. The primary symptoms of the disease are, as a result, paralysis, dementia, and blindness.

There is no recovery from the disease, and treatment only consists of delaying the inevitable—once vCJD develops in a person, it is only a matter of time before the brain wastes entirely away. The inefficiency the prions exhibit in moving species to species means that a victim could develop symptoms of vCJD *years* after consuming meat containing BSE prions. The onset of the disease can be sudden, and the nightmarish progress of the disease is a gradual, irreversible and inevitable descent into insanity.

Though there have been more than 100 reported cases of vCJD confirmed globally, what toll the disease has already taken on the world’s population cannot be known for sure, because testing for it in humans requires an autopsy to remove brain tissue suspected of infection from the victim, and because such a procedure can cost on average around \$1,500 at the victim’s family’s expense. Also, a patient with vCJD can easily be misdiagnosed with hereditary Creutzfeldt-Jacob’s Disease or with Alzheimer’s, since the symptoms are so similar. Indeed, of the 4 million Alzheimer’s sufferers in the US alone, we can only speculate how many could already actually be suffering from a BSE-related prion disease—estimates range from 3 to 25 percent, and are supported by the recent inexplicable spike in Alzheimer’s cases.

Studies are complicated by the relative absence of US federal funding for BSE research. Serious scientists interested in pursuing research and study in the area of prion diseases must either compete among themselves for the scant \$27 million (2002) in total annual federal funds for BSE research (which, when considered against the backdrop of huge costs in equipment, maintenance and laboratory space, is a pittance) or enter the area of corporate-funded research. Scientists hired by the beef industry are pressured to conclude that the company’s product presents no health risk (i.e., they are given the humiliating and anti-scientific task of making sure

the square peg fits in the round hole).

Independent scientists and consumer advocates have long warned that BSE would appear in the US. The giant agribusinesses that dominate the industry and their political representatives in Washington, on the other hand, have repeatedly resisted measures that could protect the public, including those that have substantially reduced the incidence of the disease in Britain and much of Europe since being instituted after the outbreak of the 1980s.

While only 20,000 cows are annually tested for BSE in the US, western European countries tested 10 million cows last year and Japan tested each of the 1.2 million cows it slaughtered. It is estimated that the cost increase for universal testing per pound of beef in the US would be on the order of \$.05 per pound of beef (\$20-\$55 per head of cattle)—a figure the industry says is too costly.

Proposals for systems to track which farms produced sickened cattle—already in place in Europe, Canada and Japan—have been blocked in the US. Agriculture Department officials have recently said they would speed up efforts to create a national database for tracking animals. The system, however, would be voluntary, leaving it up to the farmers and ranchers to decide whether to register their animals.

Moreover, only 1 or 2 percent of “downer” cows—animals too sick or injured to stand, such as the Washington state cow—are regularly checked for BSE. Instead, between 150,000 and 200,000 of these animals, mostly older dairy cows unable to produce milk anymore, are slaughtered and turned into hamburger meat and other products each year.

Consumer advocates have long warned that downer cows—some so sick or injured that they have to be dragged or bulldozed to the killing floor—were likely sources of not only BSE, but of other threats to human health like E. coli, Salmonella bacteria and listeriosis. McDonald’s, Wendy’s and Burger King will not accept downer meat, and the USDA forbids it in school lunches.

The response of the USDA to the discovery of BSE prions in the Washington cow was to ban directly feeding downer cows to humans and to demand speedier testing (the volume of mandatory testing remains the same). The measures, however, were little more than a public relations gesture, designed to placate the American consumers and foreign importers of US beef while imposing as little additional cost as possible on the beef industry.

Officials in Japan, which accounts for 30 percent of US exports, denounced the measures as inadequate and demanded BSE testing of all cattle. “There is no guarantee that BSE will not occur again in the US,” a report from the Japanese agricultural ministry stated. A coalition of food safety advocacy groups in the US also denounced the measures, pointing to the previous loopholes the USDA had granted the beef industry.

In 1997, the USDA banned the practice of feeding chopped up bits of cattle and other ruminants (mammals with multi-stomachs such as sheep and goats) to cows. Not only was enforcement lax given the lack of a sufficient number of inspectors, but the USDA continued to allow meat from other animals including chickens and pigs—which can contract BSE—to be included in cattle feed. Moreover, cattle parts and slaughterhouse waste at risk of contamination continued to be fed to pigs and chickens and then back to cows. Finally, cow blood, which can also carry the disease, continues to be widely fed to calves as high-protein “milk replacer” to encourage quick growth.

In 2002, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of Congress, concluded: “BSE may be silently incubating somewhere in the United States. If that is the case, then Food and Drug Administration’s failure to enforce the feed ban may already have placed U.S. herds and, in turn, the human food supply at risk. FDA has no clear enforcement strategy for dealing with firms that do not obey the feed ban.... Moreover, FDA has been using inaccurate, incomplete, and unreliable data to track and oversee feed ban compliance.”

Although the USDA said it would add some restrictions, it has yet to ban the use of so-called Advanced Meat Recovery (AMR) systems, which have been roundly criticized. In the mid-1990s, in an effort to further slash labor costs and increase output, meatpackers began using machines that could strip a few extra pounds of meat off carcasses using pressurized water jets. Critics have tried to limit the use of these machines, citing studies, including a 2002 USDA survey, showing that approximately 35 percent of high-risk meat products tested positive for central nervous system tissues (which have been shown to effectively transmit BSE prions).

The beef industry also uses bolt guns, band saws and stunners to kill and eviscerate cows at the slaughterhouse, inevitably propelling potentially dangerous material from the brain and central nervous system throughout the carcass and into the blood stream, which can then travel to every part of the cow’s body.

Finally, a very real danger exists that infected slaughterhouse waste could be transferred into the myriad of products made from rendering the non-meat remains on the killing floor. This multibillion-dollar industry includes everything from cosmetics to “gummy-bear” candies and gelatin, to dietary supplements, vaccines, steroids and blood-thinners.

All of these dangers persist following the recent half-measures taken by the USDA.

Over the past decade, the USDA has presided over a vast and steady deregulation of the beef industry. Over \$41 million of beef industry resources went toward buying those deregulations, and paying off those politicians that saw them through. Republicans received about 80 percent of that money, though the meat business also paid off several high-ranking Democrats, including Senate minority leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota and former House minority leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri, both of whom draw votes from states in which the beef industry plays a major economic role.

The Bush administration in 2002 killed a Senate proposal to prohibit US meatpackers from using downer cattle for human consumption. Just five months before the discovery of BSE in Washington state—after the first North American case of mad cow disease had already been discovered in Wanham, Alberta, in May 2003—Congress again blocked such a ban. One study by the *San Jose Mercury News* showed that the California representatives who voted against the ban received five times as much money in campaign contributions from the beef and dairy industry as those who voted against it.

A January 5 *New York Times* article documented the incestuous relationship between the industry and the federal regulators Bush appointed as top officials in the USDA. “According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy group, a dozen top officials of the Department of Agriculture have worked or lobbied for the beef industry or for industry trade groups. They include Jim Moseley, the deputy agriculture secretary, who was managing director of Infinity LLC, a hog farm; Dr. Chuck Lambert, the deputy under secretary for marketing and regulatory programs, who was chief economist of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association; and Mary Waters, the assistant secretary for Congressional relations, who was senior director and legislative counsel for ConAgra Food.”

“It’s not surprising the industry has so much influence given the number of USDA officials who have been hired directly out of the meat industry,” Caroline Smith DeWaal, the center’s food safety director, told the *Times*.

Over the last 20 years, the meatpacking industry has been consolidated into in the hands of a small group of monopolies: Iowa Beef Processors (now part of Tyson Foods), ConAgra, Cargill, Farmland and Smithfield, which account for 80 percent of all cattle slaughtered in the country, and 60 percent of hogs. This consolidation followed the shakeout of the 1980s, which saw the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, the shutdown of

scores of plants, and a ruthless wage-cutting and union-busting drive at Hormel, Wilson Foods, John Morrell, IBP and other companies. Meat workers, who in the 1960s earned 16 percent more than the average factory worker, now make 25 percent less, and are largely made up of immigrant workers from Guatemala and Mexico, as well as several Asian countries.

The US beef industry is a massive operation—America as of 2001 exported as much as 16 percent of the world’s beef, and annual receipts from the US cattle industry annually exceed \$40 billion. However, the pressure on profit margins—which rarely climb above 2 percent—has led the industry to repeatedly sacrifice public safety in order to slash costs and increase output.

On January 6, the Washington cow found to have been infected with BSE prions was traced by its DNA and an ear tag to a herd located in Alberta, Canada, prompting a lot of posturing by political and industry leaders in both countries. The previous May, the US restricted the import of Canadian beef after inspectors in that country discovered the first case of BSE in Canada—a move that helped boost US beef exports and profits. Canada has now reciprocated by imposing restrictions on US beef.

Politicians on the payroll of the beef industry got in front of the cameras with packets of hamburger wrapped up in red, white and blue, and labeled “Made in America,” suggesting that adding “Country of Origin” labels would protect the public from infected beef. The industry for its own reasons—not wanting to emphasize the potential danger BSE poses to the public—moved quickly to quash a labeling mandate included in the new federal budget.

However, no country is “safe” from BSE. Currently, for example, a country can legislate a ban on American beef, but this has the effect of simply *diverting* the beef—the beef or other byproducts are simply shipped from the US to a country with little or no regulations, repackaged, and then sent to the country that legislated the ban, disguised as a product of the intermediate country.

Like the AIDS epidemic or the outbreak of SARS, mad cow disease is an international problem and must be combated as such. Vast recent advances in technology and medical knowledge have endowed the human species with the capacity to combat serious infectious threats, but the division of the world into competing nation states and the continuous subordination of social needs to the profits of huge multinational corporations serve to obstruct any internationally coordinated effort to do this.

As long as the production of humanity’s food is governed by the drive to maximize profit and not to safely meet the needs of public nutrition, preventable diseases like vCJD can quickly escalate into public health disasters.



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