

BSE/Mad Cow Disease crisis provokes trade war

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2 August 2004

The spread of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, has provoked a trade war in cattle and beef products.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE, Organisation Internationale des Epizooties) has blamed the “recent international trade disruptions” on “the apparent misinterpretation of BSE standards or the failure to implement these standards” by governments involved in the cattle and beef trade.

The OIE has issued standards designed to reduce the spread of BSE via trade using a risk assessment that counts the number of BSE cases found in a country and the controls used to prevent the spread of the disease. There are five categories of risk ranging from “free of BSE” to high risk. Governments have sought to block imports of cattle and beef by declaring importing countries high risk.

BSE in cattle has been linked with the fatal human brain condition variant Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease (vCJD), which has affected at least 147 people, the vast majority of whom lived in the United Kingdom where the disease originated. Recent research on tonsils and appendixes suggests that as many as 3,800 people in the UK may be harbouring vCJD but there are higher and lower estimates.

The total number of confirmed cases of BSE in cattle in the UK since its discovery in 1986 is around 180,000. Currently the UK is in the highest risk category, but the British government asked the European Commission in June 2003 to downgrade its status to moderate risk. Ben Bradshaw, Minister for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, claimed the reduced status was justified because there were only 374 BSE cases in 2003 and tough control measures are in place. He said, “If we are successful and enter the reduced category this will be a major turning point as it will bring us in line with a number of other member states making trade much more accessible.” It will “enable us to compete again with much of Europe by re-opening important export markets for British beef,” Bradshaw added.

The beef industry could be worth £11 billion in exports.

The European Food Safety Authority agreed in May 2004 to the moderate risk status, but its implementation is being delayed by public health agencies.

Controls in the UK involve a ban on recycling mammalian-based feed to farm animals; a ban on cattle over 30-months-old and all high risk animal tissues (Specified Risk Materials SRM), like the brain and spine, from entering the human food chain; and the introduction of a cattle tagging and tracking system.

Besides seeking “moderate risk” status from Europe, the British government is also trying to relax the ban on the consumption of beef from cattle over 30-months-old. Robert Forster, chief executive of the National Beef Association, has complained that the scheme costs about £360 million a year “to incinerate perfectly good beef”. The government-run British Food Standards Agency says that the Department of Health should lift the ban and replace it with a BSE test on every cow, even though the government’s own expert Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee warned the decision was based “on expert judgment rather than being fully informed by all the required data”.

This pressure for change comes about despite concerns that the controls are flouted and that there is worrying new scientific evidence about the nature of BSE.

A recent report by the Public Accounts Committee of the UK Parliament found that the Cattle Tracing System was “developed in haste and has suffered from serious technical difficulties” which has resulted in £14 million fines from the European Commission and a possible further £36 million to pay. Two thirds of the 700 staff employed by the CTS service are currently correcting 1.2 million “anomalies” involving 200,000 cattle and two million sheep movements. Committee chairman, MP Edward Leigh, said the CTS “does not fully meet the needs of state veterinarians to control outbreaks of infectious diseases amongst cattle, which is all the more unacceptable given that it was introduced in response to the BSE crisis in the 1990s.”

Of more concern are reports from scientists that there may be different types of BSE-like diseases in cattle that could produce other fatal brain diseases. Italian researchers have identified a brain pattern in two cows that is different from the traditional BSE one and French and Japanese scientists have also discovered atypical cases. In the UK, Professor John Collinge has injected mice with BSE-infected material and whilst some

developed a vCJD response, others resembled sporadic CJD, a related disease that affects older people. When asked why British scientists had not found different types of BSE previously, Collinge said it was because the government had sponsored such research. "It has always been on the cards, but it has not been a terribly popular thing to suggest," he added.

An additional worry is that the fatal sheep disease scrapie could be masking BSE. If this proves correct most of the UK flock would have to be slaughtered. The British government introduced compulsory measures in June 2004 to eradicate scrapie from affected flocks. At present dead sheep are tested for scrapie and those found positive are also tested for BSE. However, there have been 78 unconfirmed test results that do not resemble either BSE or scrapie.

Although the BSE crisis has affected British farming most severely, it has also hit trade worldwide, including Japan and North America.

In Japan, the discovery of BSE in September 2001 led Health, Labour and Welfare Minister Chikara Sakaguchi to introduce BSE testing on all slaughtered animals. The consumption of beef, including imported meat, fell as a result. In December 2003, Japan banned American beef after the first confirmed case of BSE in the US was found in a cow in the state of Washington. Although the US domestic market for beef has not declined, exports have been hard hit. Trade with Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay for example has dropped from \$7.5 billion to \$4.8 billion.

The Japanese government has demanded that the US authorities test all slaughtered cattle for the disease or provide similar safety assurances before US beef imports can start again. The US government has rejected this request, claiming that blanket testing of all cattle is unscientific.

Testing in the US is only carried out on cattle showing signs of central nervous stress, although cattle can incubate the disease for many years before it shows itself. In 2003, the US Food and Drug Administration (USDA) carried out tests on only 20,000 cows out of the nearly 40 million head of cattle slaughtered.

The US government's main response to the BSE crisis has been to rely on the removal of SRMs from animal feedstuffs—introduced in 1997. Following the discovery of BSE in Washington state the USDA banned SRMs from meat intended for human consumption in January 2004 and is considering their prohibition in cosmetics and dietary supplements. An initial \$19 million voluntary National Animal Identification System is also being considered.

Sakaguchi has so far refused to bow to Washington's demands to withdraw his ban. He said, "We have to think about people's feeling as well as scientific issues. We will examine whether we can provide data that reassure consumers." He added, "I made a decision on (introducing) the blanket testing. I am opposed to a hasty review."

Whilst the US government has criticised the Japanese

government for banning US beef imports based on a single BSE case (and has no doubt put pressure on the OIE to issue its statement), it has restricted imports from its neighbour Canada following the discovery of BSE there in May 2003.

The US-Canadian border is closed to live cattle and beef cuts from over 30-month-old cows. Prices have crashed in Canada and thousands of workers have lost their jobs. Exports have slumped from \$4 billion to \$1.5 billion.

In Alberta, home to one-third of Canada's cattle and where two-thirds of the country's beef is produced, over half the municipal districts have declared themselves economic disaster areas because of BSE. Alberta Agriculture Minister Shirley McClellan said she did not know when the border would reopen and called on the US government to resist closing it again if more cases of BSE are found. "We must ensure countries cannot use an incident like this as a trade barrier, that decisions are really based on sound science," said McClellan.

Recently, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin blamed US "special interests" for blocking free trade between the two countries and explained that Canada is considering building large processing plants to cope with the oversupply of cattle, targeting large US markets such as South Korea.

The Canadian government has also been quick to silence scientists who have a "special interest" in maintaining public health. Three senior scientists who worked in the veterinary drugs approval laboratories of Health Canada—Shiv Chopra, Margaret Haydon and Gerard Lambert—were sacked on July 14 this year. The three had repeatedly criticised Health Canada policies in public, claiming they were pressured into approving drugs they thought might endanger humans. Long before BSE was detected in Alberta they had warned their managers that the department's policies to fight BSE were inadequate.

The BSE and vCJD diseases have become an international problem. However, the division of the world into competing nation states and the subordination of social needs to the profits of huge multinational corporations had obstructed an internationally coordinated effort to overcome it. Instead, it results in economic trade war. As long as the production of humanity's food is governed by the drive to maximise profit, preventable diseases like vCJD quickly escalate into public health disasters.



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