



To: Extension Agents and Beef Producers

From: Dave Maples and Jim Akers, KCA

Subj: First Case of BSE

Date: December 31, 2003

As you are aware, the first case of BSE has been discovered in the US. I'd like to share excerpts of information from an e-mail written by Doug Shepherd, Hardin County Extension Agent. This is practical, basic information that was sent to producers in his area. Some information has been updated since Doug's original message.

“Short-term: beef and cattle prices will go down. In the US today, perception = reality. Media reports thus far that I've seen contain a wealth of INCORRECT information on this disease. You, as local beef producers, need to be the source of correct information on this very serious matter.”

The following information is correct, truthful info on this disease – that you can disseminate to consumers and fellow producers.....the quicker their fears are calmed; the sooner beef prices will rebound:

Short and Sweet truths:

- The disease is NOT contagious – cows can't catch it from contact with other cows and humans cannot catch it from contact with cattle. It can only be spread by the consumption of brain tissue/spinal cord/retinas from diseased animals.
- US beef and milk is/was/and will be safe to consume. BSE has never been found in muscle meats or milk, and USDA has had firewalls in place.
- This could not be an act of terrorism. (Incubation period for the disease is 2 to 8 years).
- The disease is found only in older adult animals (3-6 years old), usually dairy cattle. All beef consumed today is mainly from 15-16 month old cattle.

More detailed information:

- The disease IS NOT contagious. There is NO scientific evidence that BSE spreads horizontally (i.e. – by contact between unrelated adult cattle and from cattle to other species.)
- People cannot catch it from cows. Cows cannot transmit the disease to other cows or to people. It is a “cattle only” disease – that's why the “B” in its name (BSE) stands for BOVINE = cattle.

- BSE is a chronic degenerative disease that affects the central nervous system. Affected cattle will die. There is neither a treatment nor a vaccine for the disease. The incubation period (from infection to symptoms) is 2 to 8 years. Once symptoms are seen, death occurs in two weeks to six months. Most cases occur in animals 3 to 6 years of age. There is no test to detect it in live animals.
- In cattle infected with BSE – the BSE agent has only been found in brain tissue, spinal cord and in the retina. Thus, unless these body parts are consumed, there is no risk from eating beef. Muscle tissue does NOT contain the BSE agent and therefore is safe to eat.
- The agent responsible for BSE is smaller than the smallest known virus and has not been completely characterized. In short, they don't know what it is....it could be a virus, a prion (abnormal form of a protein) or a virino (an incomplete virus).
- USDA has monitored cattle for 13 years and has tested over 57,352 brain specimens (as of 9/30/03) from cattle displaying any neurological symptoms that might indicate BSE.
- The video being shown on TV of BSE-infected cattle is NOT from the animal in the US. It is video that was shot in 1986 in England.
- The only way the disease can be spread is recycling by-products from cattle infected with BSE itself. The BSE agent has to be spread through the feeding of meat and bone meal from BSE-infected animals.
- USDA active surveillance efforts began in 1990.
- Import restrictions have been in place since 1989.
- All cattle imported from Britain from 1981-89 have been under quarantine since April, 1996 only 4 are still alive.
- As of August, 1997, FDA prohibited the feeding of most mammalian proteins to ruminants.
- All cattle presented for slaughter in the US are inspected before slaughter for signs of BSE. Any animal exhibiting BSE signs are condemned and the meat is not permitted to be used for human food.
- All animals presented for slaughter are inspected by certified USDA inspectors both pre and post harvest for any abnormalities, diseases or contamination.

Market Impact

- Basically, there is no real trade or movement of cattle in the US from December 15 through the first week of January due to the holidays. So the speculators will be in the market, but actual producers/processors will not.
- Holidays aren't a big beef/milk consumption time anyway.
- The futures of feeder and live cattle traded limit down until December 29 when the further out contracts began to ease up and trade more positively. These contracts were still losing value but were not moving down the limit. December 30 saw more futures contracts fail to trade down the limit and some even posted no change.
- The opinion of many traders is that this will seal the deal on the opening of the Canadian border for resumption of live cattle imports. Basically, it isn't going to happen. Therefore, our supplies will be even tighter going into summer than anticipated, a very positive for prices.
- Export markets account for approximately 9% of US beef trade, the Canadians relied on exports for over 50% of their production. Temporary reduction in exports from the US will have a much less dramatic impact on prices compared to the response in Canadian markets.

- The worst thing a producer could do right now is get caught up in the short term negative and sell cattle. More cattle on the market will only extend the time it will take for the market to work through this situation, and further depress prices.

Considering everything – if there could be a best time for this type of news to hit the industry, it's probably now.”

Doug Shepherd
270-765-4121
dshepher@uky.edu