American Beef Continues to be Safe from BSE

By Melvin N. Kramer, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Over the past two weeks there has been increased media attention on BSE in meat. With this cascade of news, pundits have taken to the airwaves questioning the safety of U.S. beef in terms of BSE and once again raise the question: Should all animals be tested? The answer to that question is short and simple…***No!***

The only ones who would gain from testing every animal would be the test kit manufacturers. There is no gain for the consuming public in terms of identification of BSE for prevention of vCJD. The U.S. surveillance protocol is epidemiologically sound.

The United States has examined 605,252 high-risk animals. Originally, this study was going to last 18 months, but it has been extended and is ongoing. Furthermore, in a separate study, 21,216 healthy, older animals were also tested. In fact, a far greater number of U.S. cattle have been tested than was originally thought to be necessary by the USDA. The program exceeds 10 times the number the OIE suggested be tested based on our cattle population. To date, with this enhanced study, the U.S. has reported 1 positive case of BSE in a native-born animal. That animal was a downer that—when it was presented at a plant producing food for dogs—was actually rejected. It was never destined for the human food chain and, clearly, it did not get into the human food chain, nor, for that matter, did it get into dog food.

In 1989 the U.S. initially banned the importation of live ruminants and most ruminant products from the UK and other countries where BSE is diagnosed. In 1997, the USDA extended the ban to product coming from anywhere in Europe, and the FDA meanwhile prohibited the feeding of most mammalian protein to cattle and other ruminants. Then, in 2000, the USDA prohibited all imports of rendered animal protein products, regardless of species, from 30 countries in Europe—originating, rendered, processed or otherwise associated with European animal protein products. Most recently, in 2004, downers and specified risk materials (SRMs), including the small intestines and tonsils in all age animals and the skull, eyes, brain, trigeminal ganglia, spinal cord, vertebral column and dorsal root ganglia in all cattle over 30 months of age, were added to the preexisting bans.

This is the current food-safety paradigm. It has worked and, over time, the probability of finding a BSE positive animal—which could exist like the proverbial "needle in a haystack," but is already nearly nonexistent—will significantly decrease. *(continued…)*

This chart illustrates what surveillance programs around the world have found:

	COW POPULATION	TOTAL TESTS	BSE POSITIVES	BSE POSITIVES / 1000 TESTED
USA	42,000,000	620,000	1	**0.0016**
Canada	4,255,326	87,000	4	**0.0460**
Japan	1,810,050	3,500,000	22	**0.0063**
U.K. / TESTED	7,350,000	183,946,185	184,500	**1.0030**

U.S. and Canada test highest risk cattle or deads and downs over 30 months of age. In the U.K. experience deads and downs are 29 times more likely to have BSE than normal healthy cattle. All but one of the 22 BSE positives in Japan were the result of widespread testing of slaughtered animals before product was to be placed into commerce with the recently confirmed 22nd case in an older animal that died after exhibiting neurological symptoms. Consequently, they would have many fewer positive/thousand tested, as they are not testing the high-risk cattle.

Testing is costly and, because of what's noted above, ineffective as a preventive measure. The U.S. firewalls—based on our surveillance and data from the UK, which has done extensive testing and research—have proven to protect both our animals' health and, ultimately, human health. The industry has cooperated and has partnered with the USDA with the firewalls, with testing, and with trade negotiations.

Lastly, and perhaps least known and understood, the U.S. monitors both retrospectively and prospectively for the human form of BSE, which is termed vCJD or variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Our surveillance has not detected any cases of Americans who have become infected with vCJD. The only positive finding was a tragic case of a young woman who was born and lived through her early teenage years in the U.K., came to the U.S., was diagnosed and subsequently died. Internationally, this case is without question accepted and attributable to the acquisition of the disease in the United Kingdom.

The bottom line: *U.S. beef is safe to eat.* Our firewalls are in place. They are working, and there is no scientific justification for mandatory or voluntary testing above and beyond what the USDA is conducting through the APHIS program.

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