

23 December 2003

**Agriculture Sec. Veneman Announces Suspected Mad Cow Case in U.S.**

Tests still under way; would be first U.S. BSE case

Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman December 23 announced the first suspected instance in the United States of a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease, a fatal livestock malady that in rare instances can spread to humans and that led to severe losses in the European livestock industry after it appeared there in the 1980s.

Veneman, at a Washington briefing, said the animal in question came from Washington state, and was identified as sick at the time of slaughter. She said a sample from the animal taken December 9 tested "presumptive positive" at a lab in Ames, Iowa, and a sample was being flown to England for further tests to confirm the U.S. finding.

"Despite this finding," Veneman said, "we remain confident in the safety of our food supply. The risk to human health from BSE is extremely low."

She said the farm to which the animal was traced has been quarantined. "After the animal was slaughtered meat was sent for processing to Midway Meats in Washington State," she said. "USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service is working quickly to accurately determine the final disposition of the products from the animal."

Since 1990, Veneman said, the Department of Agriculture "has had an aggressive surveillance program in place to ensure detection and a swift response in the event of the introduction of BSE in this country. As part of that program we developed a response plan to be used if BSE is identified in the United States. While this is a presumptive finding, we have activated that response plan today."

Based on the information available, she said, the incident is "not terrorist related nor is it related in any way to our nation's heightened alert status," adding "I cannot stress this point strongly enough."

Following is a Department of Agriculture transcript of the Veneman briefing:

(begin transcript)

USDA Transcript

Transcript of News Conference with Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman on BSE

Tuesday, December 23, 2003

Washington D.C.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: We are here this afternoon on such very short notice. Joining me today are Bill Hawks, USDA's Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory programs; Dr. Elsa Murano, our Under Secretary for Food Safety; and Dr. Ron DeHaven, our Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services at the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service and our chief veterinarian here at USDA.

They will assist me in answering any questions that you have.

Today we received word from USDA's National Veterinary Services Laboratories in Iowa that a single Holstein cow from Washington State has tested as presumptive positive for BSE or what is widely known as mad cow disease.

Despite this finding we remain confident in the safety of our food supply. The risk to human health from BSE is extremely low. The animal tested was a downer cow or nonambulatory at the time of slaughter and was identified as part of USDA's targeted surveillance program.

The sample was taken on December 9th. It was tested and retested at our Ames facility using two tests including immuno-histo-chemistry, which is recognized as the "gold standard" for the detection of BSE by the World Health Organization and OIE, the Organization of International Epizootics.

A sample from this animal is being flown on a military aircraft to the central veterinary laboratory in Weybridge, England in order to confirm this finding. Our traceback indicates that the animal comes from a farm in Mabton, Washington, about 40 miles southeast of Yakima, Washington.

As part of our response plan that farm has been quarantined. After the animal was slaughtered meat was sent for processing to Midway Meats in Washington State. USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service is working quickly to accurately determine the final disposition of the products from the animal.

Even though the risks to human health is minimal based on current evidence, we will take all appropriate actions out of an abundance of caution.

Since 1990 the U.S. Department of Agriculture has had an aggressive surveillance program in place to ensure detection and a swift response in the event of the introduction of BSE in this country. As part of that program we developed a response plan to be used if BSE is identified in the United States.

While this is a presumptive finding, we have activated that response plan today. We are making the appropriate notifications and confirmations under the plan and start-up activities are beginning.

I have been in contact with Secretary Ridge and I would emphasize that based on the information available this incident is not terrorist related nor is it related in any way to our nation's heightened alert status. I cannot stress this point strongly enough.

The safety of our food supply and public health are high priorities of this Administration and high priorities of USDA. In the last year we have tested 20,526 head of cattle for BSE, which is triple the level of the previous year of 2002. The presumptive positive today is a result of our aggressive surveillance program. This is a clear indication that our surveillance and detection program is working.

USDA has been training and planning for several years in case this situation presented itself. We continue to protect the U.S. food supply and the public health and safeguard American agriculture.

In October we announced findings from the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis that found that even if an infected animal were introduced into the U.S. animal agriculture system, the risk of spreading is low based on the safeguards and controls we have already put in place.

As part of our response to this situation we will provide daily briefings to update the public on the status. We will continue to provide you all of the information that we possibly can and do so as quickly as possible.

We have released this finding even before final confirmation in the U.K. because of our confidence in the testing that has already been carried out, and in the interest of protecting the food supply and public health. Information is available on our web site at [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov), and we will be updating that information frequently.

We will also have regularly recorded updates for you, and you may call a toll-free number, 1-866-4USDA-COM.

While this incident would represent the first finding of BSE in the United States, we have worked hard to ensure that our response is swift and effective. We will continue to work with partners such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Homeland Security to protect our food supply and the public health.

At this time of year many Americans are making plans for the holidays and for food. We see no need for people to alter those plans or their eating habits or to do anything but have a happy and healthy holiday season. I plan to serve beef for my Christmas dinner. And we remain confident in the safety of our food supply.

I want to thank you all again for being here on this late hour and on such short notice. But we did feel it was important to update you on this important situation. Thank you. And we will be glad to take your questions.

PARTICIPANT: Danielson, Bloomberg News. Is there any connection with this finding to the incident in Alberta, Canada? That perhaps that cow came down from Canada in any way?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: It is way too early to tell, but I would think that the situation of trying to put those two incidences together would be doubtful, primarily because they're different kinds of animals. This was a Holstein cow.

MR. FAUVY: Randy Fabi with Reuters. Have you alerted any of your trading partners to this incidence, and, if so, have they -- have any countries taken action against, close their borders to U.S. beef exports?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Again, it's very early, Randy. We have -- we are in the process of notifying a whole range of people at this point, including our trading partners, and I can't at this point anticipate what they may do in response to this announcement.

MR. SALANTE: Jonathan Salante with the Associated Press. What steps, if any, are you specifically taking to prevent the spread of this disease, and what assurances do we have that the beef is -- that the other beef is not contaminated?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, I think it's very important to recognize that this disease does not spread easily. One of the things that people are very confused about, and I found it as we went through situation when Canada had a single case of BSE is a lot of times people don't understand that this is not foot and mouth disease; it's not that highly contagious disease that you often see spread so quickly as you did in the U.K. at the beginning of 2001. So it's important to make that distinction.

We have been taking steps since 1990 to protect our beef supplies from this disease. We implemented a feed ban; we have required the removal of any kind of risk materials from an animal like this one, a downer animal, and we have a whole series of actions that have been taken to reduce, substantially, the risk to public health from this disease if it ever were found. And that's why we continue to believe that this finding, while unfortunate, does not pose any kind of significant risk to the human food chain.

MS. NAGEL: Sara Nagel, Fox News. Can you tell us who this will affect, what the chances that it could become more widespread here in the U.S. are?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, I think at this point it's hard to tell, but again, the unfortunate find of a single case in Canada earlier this year gave us some experience of the type of investigation

that we now have to do. We did not know when the Canada investigation started, whether or not there would be more cases or whether or not it would be an isolated case. Indeed, after several months of checking into the situation, it turned out to be an isolated case.

It is too early at this point to say whether or not this will be an isolated case. What I can tell you that we're doing is we're going back to the farm where this cow came from. We will be doing a complete investigation on farm and tracing the animal back to its origin.

MR. RIVALL: Sorry, Audy Rivall, ABC News. Tell us a little bit more about this particular farm. What do you plan to do about the other animals? Are you saying that it was quarantined, and you're -- and it's going to test the other -- the cows there? And also, how concerned are you that the public outcry of people here on the street hear "mad cow" there could be some sort of hysteria associated with that? How concerned are you about that? And, certainly, you must agree that it's a possibility, are you not?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, I would certainly hope that people will remain confident in the food supply. As I said, we in some ways had some experience with this because of the one find in Canada. What we found because of the actions that were taken both in Canada and in the United States with the case earlier this year is that demand for beef did not diminish partly because we believe the people in North America know that we have the strongest food safety systems in the world. We have the protections in place, and again, I, personally, do not hesitate to recommend to anyone that beef is absolutely safe to eat.

As to the farm, your other question, again we're in the very early stages of the investigation. We have a complete book of protocols that we're following with regard to how we would deal if we ever had an outbreak of BSE. We're following all those steps, including we've already located the farm, and that farm will be quarantined and an investigation will begin. Again, this was very recent breaking news so we're taking all steps that we can, and we will be continuing to update you, as we indicated.

MR. DUNN: I'm (inaudible) Dunn from the Washington Post. Could you give us some sense of narrative about the farm? Why was this particular farm being studied? Was this animal significant in some way that you did tests on this animal? How many other animals were there on this farm? How many other farms are approximate to this farm?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Okay, first of all, the test was not done on the farm. The test was done when the animal was presented at the slaughter facility, and it is our standard operating procedure that what they call downer animals will be tested if they -- if they come to the slaughter facility as a downer animal.

The farm has been identified since we got the test results back from the animal. We've then gone to the plant just this afternoon, found where the animal came from, and that's where the investigation will begin in terms of looking at whether or not there is any other impact on cows on that farm. But at this point the information with regard to the farm and the surrounding areas is still pretty preliminary. I don't have that information at this point.

MR. FABI: Randy Fabi with Reuters. I'm just -- what is the likelihood that any of this cow made it into the food supply? I know that you have contacted the meat suppliers. Is there a recall underway?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: That's -- that, Randy, is what we're trying to identify at this point. We do believe that the product from the animal went to two further processing plants. This plant was a very small plant. It just slaughters a few animals, and our current understanding, and again it's very preliminary, is that that product did go to further processing plants. But again, one thing that is important to remember is that muscle cuts of meats have almost no risk. In fact, as far as the

science is concerned, I know of no science to show that you can transmit BSE from muscle cuts of meat. So the fact that it's gone to further processing is not significant in terms of human health. But we are doing the trace backs. We are looking at trace forwards, where did the product go. And we will take appropriate actions as we make the determinations as to where the product is and what has happened to it.

I think we -- I mentioned one of them, but there is actually two.

DR. MURANO: Let me first reiterate what the Secretary just said. You should know that the tissues that are the infectious tissues from an animal that has BSE, that is the central nervous system tissues, the brains, spinal cord and so forth, of this animal did not enter the food supply. Those tissues to rendering. So they did not enter the food supply. That's very important to know.

Now, the muscles cuts, as the Secretary said, went from the slaughter facility to another facility that did the deboning and that facility is Midway Meats, as the Secretary mentioned. Then from there we believe that it went to two other facilities. One is called Willamette and the second one is called Interstate Meat, both in Washington State.

Again, the muscle cuts are where there is virtually no risk of BSE. The material, the brain, spinal cord, distal ileum, which is where the BSE agent resides, those materials did not enter the food supply.

PARTICIPANT: (inaudible) with CNN. You said the health risks are minimal but what if someone did eat meat contaminated with this. What are the health risks?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, again as Dr. Murano just indicated, there is virtually no chance that the meat has been contaminated and the agents, that would be the high risk agents in any animal have been removed from this particular animal so we really don't believe that there is—we believe that the risk of any kind of human health effect is extremely low.

PARTICIPANT: Yes, but what if you find another animal on the farm that is contaminated.

DR. MURANO: Well, you should know that the agent that causes mad cow disease as I said earlier resides mainly in those tissues that I mentioned, the brain, spinal cord, distal ileum, which were removed from this animal and sent to rendering so they were not in the food supply. The scientific community believes that there is no evidence to demonstrate that muscle cuts or whole muscle meats that come from animals that are infected with mad cow disease agent themselves—the meat itself is effective to human beings. There is no evidence to show that and that is as far as we can state that. It's a good thing obviously that the infectious materials from this animal were removed and sent to rendering which is something that we do as standard practice on these downer animals that are tested by APHIS.

PARTICIPANT: Christopher (inaudible) with Reuters. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about what is going to be happening in the U.K. specifically and what your timetable is for getting final results on those tests?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, as I indicated, the sample is being flown to a laboratory in the U.K. which is one of the world's best laboratories for analyzing BSE. And that will take a number of days, probably -- probably three to five days to get final results on that sample.

So, again, we are getting it there as quickly as we possibly can. But the results that we have been able to confirm in our own laboratories have been something that we felt that we ought to take action on.

PARTICIPANT: You have said that you have quarantined the farm itself. Have you imposed any kind of quarantine on the slaughterhouse at the three facilities that are downstream?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, we have people that have gone into the slaughterhouse as well as are going into the downstream facilities, starting to review records. But we will be doing a complete review and investigation of the entire food chain where this animal might have been transferred during the process.

Well, I don't think you would normally impose quarantine on a plant. You impose quarantine on a farm. But we will be doing an investigation of the plants to determine exactly where the product might have gone.

[Pause.]

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Well, we are taking all appropriate action. We first need to identify where the product went before we can take action. I am not saying that we are not taking action. As I said in my opening remarks, we are going to take all appropriate actions based upon the investigation.

I know that the tendency is to want to know all the answers right away. And we decided that we couldn't wait to give the public the information about this situation, but we certainly don't have all answers today. And that is why we will be continuing to update both our web site and the call in number that I indicated earlier and we will be conducting daily press briefings to update you on what is going on.

Thank you.

(end transcript)