Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE)

December 24, 2003

Q & A's

Q: What is the current situation regarding the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) detection?

A: On December 23, USDA announced a presumptive positive case of BSE in a Holstein cow from Washington State. On December 9, the animal was observed to be nonambulatory (a “downer”) prior to slaughter. Accordingly, as part of USDA’s targeted surveillance program for BSE, samples were taken from the animal and immediately sent to USDA’s National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa, for testing.

In turn, NVSL subjected the sample to two different tests for BSE, including immunohistochemistry testing, which is recognized as the “gold standard” for the detection of BSE by the World Health Organization and OIE, the international animal health governing body.

Q: Why is USDA calling this a “presumptive positive” case of BSE?

A: This is because final confirmation of the detection can only come from the central veterinary laboratory in Weybridge, England. The OIE requires that confirmation of a BSE detection be made at this laboratory. At the time of this posting, a sample from the animal in question is being hand-carried to the laboratory in Weybridge, and final confirmation should be made during the week of December 29.

Q: If not yet officially confirmed, why is USDA announcing the presumptive positive detection?

A: USDA announced the presumptive positive detection because we have absolute confidence in NVSL’s diagnosis and believe that final confirmation will be made shortly at the central veterinary laboratory in Weybridge, England. USDA wanted to provide as much information as soon as possible to assure State officials, producers, and consumers that we are taking all steps necessary in response to this situation. Further, USDA believes that the U.S. food supply has not been compromised in any way by this detection.

Q: What is BSE?

A: BSE is a degenerative neurological disease caused by an aberrant protein called a prion. It is in the family of diseases—all caused by prions—referred to as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, or TSEs. TSEs include scrapie in sheep and goats, chronic wasting disease (CWD) in deer and elk, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or CJD, in humans.

It’s important to note that TSEs are not communicable diseases—they do not spread easily like viruses.

Q: What do we know about the affected animal at this point?

A: USDA's preliminary traceback investigation indicates that the animal, an approximately 4 and-a-half year-old heifer, came from a farm in Mabton, Washington, about 40 miles southeast of Yakima, Washington. After the animal was slaughtered, meat was sent for processing to Midway Meats in Washington State. USDA is working quickly to investigate the detection and take all necessary actions in response. At the time of this posting, USDA has learned the following:

• The farm involved is a large dairy operation, with 2 premises—one in Mabton, WA and one in Grandview, WA. There are approximately 4,000 adult animals on these 2 premises.

• The animal was purchased into this herd in October 2001. USDA is tracing back the herds of residence prior to this purchase.

• The animal was culled due to acute calving complications.

Please see USDA's website at www.usda.gov for more information on the investigation as it becomes available.

Q: What steps is USDA taking in response to the detection?

A: Since 1990, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Food Safety Inspection Service have had an emergency response plan in place to respond to a BSE detection in the United States. Based on new scientific information and understanding about the disease, this plan was revised in 1996 and again in 2001, and includes significant input from Federal, State and industry stakeholders. In short, USDA has been preparing a response plan for a BSE detection in the United States for many years now, and we are currently carrying out specific response steps in order to collect necessary information and continue to safeguard U.S. animal health and the food supply.

USDA has coordinated with Washington State officials to put a hold order on the farm restricting the movement of the animals (both premises). USDA also immediately made the appropriate notifications and confirmations under the plan. This included notifying the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and, while there is no evidence that this situation is related to an intentional introduction of the disease, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In addition, as discussed above, traceback and traceforward investigations from the animal have begun, and USDA will be taking all other necessary steps. USDA has also asked for assistance from Canada's animal health officials who recently conducted a similar investigation following the detection of BSE in a cow in Alberta this past summer.

As part of USDA's response to this situation, officials will provide regular briefings to update the media on the status of the investigation and related efforts. Please see USDA's website at www.usda.gov for information on these briefings and other pertinent information.

Q: What are the risks to the U.S. food supply as a result of this detection?

A: Despite this finding, USDA remains confident in the safety of the U.S. food supply. The risk to human health from BSE is extremely low. As is standard practice for downer animals identified prior to slaughter, the animal's brain, spinal cord, and other related products were removed and sent to a rendering facility. These so-called "specified risk materials" present the greatest risk of carrying the BSE agent and have not entered U.S. food supply channels. The scientific community believes that there is no evidence to demonstrate that muscle cuts or whole muscle meats that come from animals infected with BSE are at risk of harboring the causative agent of the disease.

Q: What does the detection mean for U.S. beef exports?

A: In accordance with international trade agreements, USDA has notified the international animal health governing body, the OIE, of the presumptive positive BSE detection.

At the time of this posting, 11 U.S. trading partners, including, among others, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and Mexico, have suspended imports of U.S. beef and beef products. USDA officials will be working to provide U.S. trading partners and international animal health officials with information regarding the steps being taken in response to the detection.

Q: How is BSE spread in cattle?

A: Cattle can become infected with BSE by eating feed contaminated with the infectious BSE agent. This is why in 1997 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration prohibited the use of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feed intended for cows and other ruminants. For more information on the feed ban, please visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's website at www.fda.gov.

Q: How does BSE affect humans?

A: A fatal TSE affecting humans, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), is believed to be caused by eating neural tissue, such as brain and spinal cord, from BSE-affected cattle. For this reason, USDA requires that all nervous system materials be removed from downer cattle identified at U.S. slaughter facilities. These specified risk materials are removed, sent to rendering facilities, and do not enter U.S. food supply channels. We believe this practice effectively safeguards U.S. public health from vCJD.

Having said that, it is important to clarify the differences between variant CJD and another form of the disease, referred to as classic CJD. Classic CJD occurs each year at a rate of 1 to 2 cases per 1 million people throughout the world, including in the United States and other countries where BSE has never occurred. It is not linked to the consumption of neural tissue from BSE-affected cattle—both vegetarians and meat eaters have died from classic CJD.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), no cases of variant CJD have been identified in the United States, the form of the disease linked to eating neural tissue from BSE-affected cattle.

Q: How does USDA's surveillance system for BSE work?

A: The presumptive positive case of BSE is a result of USDA's aggressive and targeted surveillance program for the disease. While unfortunate, this detection is a clear indication that USDA's surveillance and detection program is working as it was designed to work.

USDA's surveillance system targets downer animals at slaughter facilities because scientific information gathered during previous BSE outbreaks in the United Kingdom and other countries has shown that these animals are at the greatest risk of harboring the BSE agent. The scientific record also shows that the disease primarily affects older animals.

Last year, USDA tripled testing levels for BSE surveillance, and this year testing reached an all-time high of 20,526 head of cattle, or 47 times the level recommended by the OIE, the international animal health governing body.

In other areas, since 1989, USDA has banned imports of live ruminants, such as cattle, sheep and goats, and most ruminant products from the United Kingdom and other countries having BSE. The ban was extended to Europe in 1997. And, as more evidence was accumulated about how the disease spread, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration prohibited the use in 1997 of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feed intended for cows and other ruminants.

Q: Will USDA be approving rapid diagnostic tests for BSE?

A: At this time, no live animal tests are approved by USDA to detect BSE. USDA requires that all post-mortem testing for BSE be done at NVSL. These tests are strictly to screen for the BSE agent and are not related to food safety.

Q: Is there a meat recall associated with the detection?

A: At the time of this posting, Verns Moses Lake Meats, a Moses Lake, WA, establishment, is voluntarily recalling approximately 10,410 pounds of raw beef that may have been exposed to tissues from the animal in question containing the infectious agent that causes BSE.

The beef subject to this recall (20 carcasses) was produced on December 9. It was then shipped to Midway Meats of Centralia, WA and several establishments where it was further processed. These establishments are Willamette Valley Meat Co., Portland, OR and Interstate Meat Dist., Inc., Clackamas, OR.

FSIS has Enforcement, Investigation and Analysis Officers (EIAO) at the three facilities and they are identifying and verifying the distribution of the product.

FSIS is continuing its investigation to ensure that all distribution of the beef products is correctly identified.

Q: What is the designation of the recall?

A: FSIS' designation of this recall as Class II is due to the extremely low likelihood that the beef being recalled contains the infectious agent that causes BSE.

According to scientific evidence, the tissues of highest infectivity are the brain, spinal cord, and distal ileum, which were removed from the rest of the animal's carcass at slaughter. Therefore, the meat produced were cuts that would not be expected to be infected or have an adverse public health impact, but are being recalled out of an abundance of caution.

Q: Is there a number consumers can call with questions about meat products?

A: Consumers with other food safety questions can phone the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline. The hotline is available in English and Spanish and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Eastern Time), Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.