USDA Confirms BSE Case in California Dairy Cow

USDA Chief Veterinarian Dr. John Clifford April 24 confirmed the discovery of an atypical case of BSE in a dairy cow in central California. The carcass of the cow, discovered in a pre-rendering inspection, was never close to entering the food chain. The carcass will be held at the Rendering facility during the investigation and then will be destroyed.

Dr. Clifford stressed the cow never presented a risk to the nation’s food supply or the U.S. beef export supply.

This is the fourth case of BSE in the United States. The first was discovered on Dec. 23, 2003, in a dairy cow in Washington state. That was the nation’s first, and only, typical BSE case. That cow was imported from Canada and it is thought it was infected by mammalian-to-mammalian feeding.

The other two instances were atypical cases of BSE. The infectious route of atypical BSE is still unknown and Dr. Clifford explained in a conference call this afternoon that the origin of atypical BSE cannot “beyond the shadow of doubt” be proven. The other atypical cases of BSE were detected in Texas and Alabama and were both beef cattle.

On the conference call, some questioned the safety of the milk supply. Dr. Clifford explained the origin that causes BSE cannot be transmitted through milk. He also stressed all parts of any carcass that could contain the prion are removed before heading to the food supply. He also stressed the prions are not “found in steaks” or other whole-muscle cuts, (that is, meat that might be ground for ground beef).

USDA has already immediately made contact with ag attaches in countries that import U.S. beef and the attaches will make contact with meat-importing officials in those countries as soon as possible. Dr. Clifford explained the discovery of this atypical case of BSE will not change the U.S. BSE status under the rules and regulations of the OIE. That means there is no scientific reason for countries importing U.S. beef to alter their beef import regulations.

An investigation into this discovery has already started. In the investigation, USDA hopes to reveal how old the cow was; where it was born; and will attempt to discover how the cow was infected. There is no specific timeline on the investigation and USDA says it will release the details as soon as they are available.

Dr. Clifford was also asked about the effectiveness of the mammalian-to-mammalian feed ban. He explained the enforcement of the ban falls under the Food & Drug Administration, but from the evidence he has seen, the U.S. has a very effective feed ban in place with a very high level of enforcement. After the question was asked, he also stressed that atypical BSE is not thought to be transmitted through the feed supply and that scientists have not yet proven the origin of atypical BSE.

BACKGROUND: On Dec. 23, 2003, USDA announced a presumptive positive case of BSE in a Holstein cow slaughtered in Washington state. The infected cow entered the U.S. on September 4, 2001, as part of a shipment of 81 animals from the source herd in Canada. Then, in June 2005, an inconclusive BSE sample from Nov. 2004 (that had originally been classified as negative on the immunohistochemistry test) was confirmed positive. USDA identified the herd of origin for the index cow in Texas. On Feb. 27, 2006, an Alabama cattle producer contacted his herd veterinarian and reported a “downer cow.” On March 15, 2006, USDA confirmed the second native case of BSE in the United States.

SURVEILLANCE: USDA implemented enhanced surveillance of BSE following the first confirmed case in the United States. Regarding enhanced surveillance, USDA says, “The ongoing BSE surveillance program, which will sample approximately 40,000 animals each year, will continue to sample the cattle populations where the disease is most likely to be found. The statistically valid surveillance level of 40,000 is consistent with science-based internationally accepted standards. This level allows USDA to detect BSE at the very low level of less than 1 case per million adult cattle, assess any change in the BSE status of U.S. cattle, and identify any rise in BSE prevalence in this country.”
"The targeted population for ongoing surveillance focuses on cattle exhibiting signs of central nervous disorders or any other signs that may be associated with BSE, including emaciation or injury, and dead cattle, as well as nonambulatory animals," states USDA, noting that samples are then set to the National Veterinary Services Laboratories in Ames, Iowa.

According to USDA, in January 2012, it performed 4,513 BSE tests; 5,313 in February; and 3,235 in March. It reports in 2011, it performed 40,482 tests; 44,301 in 2010; 44,217 in 2009; 43,145 in 2008; and 43,338 in 2007.

RESPONSE: USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement, "The beef and dairy in the American food supply is safe and USDA remains confident in the health of U.S. cattle. The systems and safeguards in place to protect animal and human health worked as planned to identify this case quickly, and will ensure that it presents no risk to the food supply or to human health. USDA has no reason to believe that any other U.S. animals are currently affected, but we will remain vigilant and committed to the safeguards in place."

Following is a recap of the responses from trading partners to the U.S. finding its fourth case of BSE, the first in six years, in a dairy cow in central California compiled by Pro Farmer Washington Consultant Jim Wiesemeyer:

Canada: The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) said that The U.S. and Canada have implemented science-based measures to protect animal and human health. The agency also noted that U.S. officials have confirmed that no part of this animal’s carcass entered the food system.

Canadian Cattlemen’s Association executive vice president Dennis Laycraft said there was no reason to for any country to ban U.S. beef as rules for market access are science based.

Mexico: Mexico will keep its current level of inspections of U.S. beef and there have been no imports from central California where the U.S. case was discovered. "Cases of atypical bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) occur occasionally," Mexico’s agriculture ministry said in a statement. "These cases have appeared in different places around the world and don’t affect trade between countries."

South Korea: South Korea mulled whether to halt inspections of U.S. beef, a move that would essentially have halted imports of U.S. beef. The country will, however, increase quarantine checks of U.S. beef and may take other emergency measures, the country’s Ag Ministry said. “At present, Seoul has not taken steps to halt customs clearance of imported U.S. beef,” South Korea’s Yonhap news agency quoted a Ministry spokesperson as saying.

However, South Korea’s second and third largest supermarket chains — Home Plus and Lotte Mart — announced they will temporarily halt sales of U.S. beef. “We stopped sales from today,” said Chung Won-hun, a Lotte Mart spokesman. “Not that there were any quality issues in the meat but because consumers were worried.”

As for inspections, an official in the quarantine policy division told AP, “We are still reviewing whether we will stop quarantine inspections.”

Japan: No shift in beef trade policy with the U.S. “There is no need for change,” in Japan’s import rules, Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura told reporters. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda will meet with U.S. President Barack Obama on April 30 via a previously scheduled visit.

Russia: According to Reuters, Russia could consider temporary restrictions on U.S. meat exports in response to the mad cow case and has requested more information from U.S. authorities on the outbreak and the response, an official said.


Taiwan: Officials said they are monitoring the situation and President Ma Ying-jeou has been informed of the case and he has directed the Council of Agriculture and the Department of Health to “handle the issue in a professional manner,” a government spokesman said.

Cabinet spokesman Philip Yang said the government is taking the case seriously and has stepped up border controls to prevent barred U.S. beef products from entering Taiwan. Yang noted that the positive test was an isolated case. Taiwan will still use its preventive “three controls, five checkpoints” measures for monitoring imports of U.S. beef.

Yang said that they are still gathering information and that will determine if additional actions may be taken.

China: No response seen as of yet.

Singapore: Food regulation officials said their import requirements were “sufficiently robust” to protect against contamination and no further action was planned.

European Union: “The (European) Commission is satisfied that the new BSE case has been confirmed in the framework of the ongoing BSE surveillance system in the United States, which prevented this animal from entering the food chain,” Commission health spokesman Frederic Vincent said in a statement.

Australia: The country’s Ag Ministry is monitoring the situation and noted in a statement that Australia “does not import beef or beef products from cattle of U.S. origin.

Australia’s cattle industry, however, is eyeing the situation to see whether or not it will bolster their trade opportunities. “We need to see how this affects the Korean and Japanese markets,” David Byard, executive officer of the Australian Beef Association, told Bloomberg News. “It all depends on how the Japanese and the Koreans take this.”