

The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

For immediate release

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Topic: Mad cow disease in the U.S.

On the morning of December 25, the BSE world reference lab in Weybridge, England, confirmed USDA's December 23 preliminary diagnosis of BSE in a single non-ambulatory dairy cow that had been slaughtered on December 9 at Vern's Moses Lake Meats in Washington State. At the time of USDA's preliminary diagnosis on December 23, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) issued a Class II recall for the facility's entire day's production. The recall was classified as Class II due to the extremely low likelihood that the beef being recalled contains the infectious agent that causes BSE.

Many of us read or heard this information from somewhere over the past week. What does that mean to us? What can we do to keep safe? The following information attempts to answer those questions and give some basic information about "Mad cow disease".

Background:

What is mad cow disease? Mad cow disease is also called bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). Mad cow is a transmissible, slowly progressive, degenerative, fatal disease affecting the central nervous system of adult cattle. Mad cow is not transmitted between cattle, like the flu in humans, and is primarily acquired from infected feed.

How are people affected? BSE is a disease that affects cattle. However, there is a disease similar to BSE called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or vCJD, which is found in people. There is strong scientific evidence that the protein that causes Mad Cow in cattle is the agent that causes vCJD in people. There has never been a case of vCJD that did not have a history of exposure within a country where Mad Cow disease was occurring. It is believed that the persons who have developed vCJD became infected through their consumption of cattle products contaminated with the agent of BSE. There is no known treatment of vCJD and it is invariably fatal.

When you say cow, I think milk. What about the milk?

Milk and milk products from cows are not believed to pose any risk for transmitting the BSE agent because experiments have shown that milk from BSE-infected cows has not caused BSE in cows or other test animals.

What is the risk to me and my family?

The following is taken from a press conference with the United States Department of Agriculture on December 29, 2003. *“The risk to human health resulting from the BSE-infected cow in Canada is extremely small, if it exists at all; no meat from this animal entered the human food supply. When this case was reported from Canada, FDA and USDA reacted immediately.”*

What happened?

The event:

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has determined the following additional information through its traceback investigation:

- USDA is continuing to trace the other 73 head of cattle that came in the same shipment as the 1 identified infected cow. Furthermore, USDA has identified another shipment of 8 cows from the same herd in Canada which USDA is also tracing.
- The cow had three calves while she was in the United States. One of them died shortly after birth. One of them remains in the herd in Washington State. That herd is under a “hold order” placed by the State of Washington—again, not to stop the spread of disease, because Mad Cow is not contagious, but rather to prevent further complications to “traceback” and “traceforward” investigations.
- A third calf from the infected cow—her most recently born bull calf—is currently in a herd of about 460 young bull calves, all around 30 days of age. That group of calves remains under a “hold order” pending completion of USDA’s investigation. Transmission of BSE from mother to calf is very rare, if it occurs at all, but the animals are being held out of an abundance of caution, to preserve public and international confidence in the health of the U.S. cattle herd.

Since the discovery of BSE, the USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) has been working around the clock to protect the public health. A recall was initiated out of an abundance of caution following the report of one cow testing presumptive positive for BSE. Even though USDA remains confident in the safety of these beef products, USDA is and will continue to verify distribution and control of all products related to this recall. Approximately 10,000 pounds of beef are covered under this recall, representing 20 cows, including the infected cow that was processed on the same day.

The following is the current situation of the beef products related to the December 23, 2003. The beef products were distributed from Verns Moses Lake to Midway Meats on December 11. Tissues most likely infected with BSE were removed at that time. Because the meat leaving Verns did not contain these high risk materials, the recalled beef presents an essentially zero risk to consumers.

The FSIS is verifying that the customers have been notified of the recalled products and know how to handle the product. FSIS has found that the products were distributed to 42 locations from Interstate Meats and Willamette Valley Meats. The vast majority of these products—at least 80 percent---were distributed to stores in Oregon and Washington. In overseeing this process, FSIS has found that all of the companies that have received these products have been proactively notifying their customers.

Do we need to worry in Branch, Hillsdale, or St. Joseph County?

Aside from the statements made by the USDA regarding food safety nationwide, none of the beef in question from this event was shipped to the Midwest or eastern U.S. All of the beef being recalled is in eight western states, including Hawaii, and Guam. There is no evidence that any beef or beef products involved in this ongoing investigation have been sold in this area of the country.

What is being done to prevent this in the future?

Several actions have been taken, some recent and some quite some time ago.

To prevent BSE from entering the United States, severe restrictions were placed on the importation of live cattle, sheep, and goats, and certain meat products from countries where BSE is known to exist. Because the use of animal tissue in feed was probably a necessary factor responsible for the BSE outbreak in England and because of the current evidence for possible transmission of mad cow disease to humans, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) instituted a ruminant (cow) feed ban that became fully effective as of October 1997. Most recently, as of December 30, 2003, the USDA imposed an immediate ban on all “downer” cattle (cattle not able to walk at the time of slaughter) from the human food chain.

What is being done to prevent Canadian products that may be contaminated with BSE from entering the United States?

The U.S. added Canada to its BSE restricted countries list, and the USDA and the FDA expanded their restrictions on imports from BSE countries to Canadian products. The FDA will continue to work with the USDA to stop a wide variety of products (animal feed, human food) with bovine-derived materials from being imported into the U.S. from BSE restricted countries, including Canada. In addition, both the FDA and the USDA are cooperating with the Customs Service to ensure food safety at the border.