

COMMENTS ON USDA REPORT ON ANIMAL DISEASE RISK ASSESMENT

October 9, 2001

Regulatory Analysis and Development PPD
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
USDA
Suite 3C034700 River Road, Unit 118
Riverdale, MD 20737-1238

RE: Docket No: 01-064-1

USDA Report on Animal Disease Risk Assessment, Prevention and Control Act of 2001 (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy - BSE)

S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority is a national nonprofit, grassroots organization consisting of victims of foodborne illness, family, friends and concerned individuals who recognize the threat pathogens pose in the U.S. food supply. Many of our members have had loved ones maimed or killed by pathogens, including E. coli O157:H7 in meat, produce, and unpasteurized apple juice; Salmonella in unpasteurized orange juice and poultry, Vibrio vulnificus in oysters, Campylobacter and Listeria. S.T.O.P.'s mission is to prevent unnecessary illness and loss of life from pathogenic foodborne illness.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to comment on current governmental progress toward prevention of BSE and related diseases. We have attached a speech we have given at a previous public meeting on BSEs.

BACKGROUND

Present U.S. policy at USDA and FDA toward the prevention of the spread of TSE's to American consumers demonstrates a lack of commitment to complete prevention. Rather than erect all formidable barriers already erected in countries affected by BSE, the U.S. has too slowly developed a kind of patchwork, on-the-fence, compromise policy that is guaranteed to fail in the face an immediate threat to the system. Unfortunately for both the public and the meat industry, by the time that challenge would be identified, it would be too late. Owing to the massive scale of food production in the United States in comparison with other countries where the disease has so far been identified, failure in this instance would mean infection of potentially tens of thousands of people, the collapse of consumer confidence in U.S. meat production, and a worldwide drought of demand for U.S. meat.

At this point in time, while TSE's are the only confirmed diseases transmitted by food consumption, U.S. health authorities cannot say with certainty how many other seemingly sporadic, neurologically degenerative diseases might also be transmitted in this way. Not only do Americans already suffer from existing sporadic cases of "classic" CJD, but we have hundreds of thousands of other patients suffering from costly, chronic, debilitating diseases such as MS and Alzheimer's with symptoms similar to those of TSEs. The costs of these diseases, and the fact that steps taken to reduce TSEs may well prevent a percentage of these diseases should be taken into account in risk analysis and economic analysis of TSE prevention measures.

URGENTLY NEEDED ACTIONS

In the meantime, S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority strongly urges USDA and FDA to immediately put in place, through emergency rulings, all measures adopted by countries that have already been affected by this disease, as well as others that are necessary for the coordination of recalls and notification of the public:

- 1) (USDA) A ban on meat-on-the-bone.
- 2) (USDA) The removal of the spinal column in slaughtering with no further processing. The U.S. should aggressively seek to eliminate all potentially contaminated spinal cord material from meat production.
- 3) (FDA) Finalization of rules and enforcement of the full EU ban on feeding "processed animal protein to animals which are kept, fattened or bred for the production of food, including all meat-and-bone meal products. This rule is essential to keeping BSE from gaining a toehold in the U.S. cattle industry, and is readily implementable in a country where soy protein is available for animal feed consumption.
- 4) (FDA's CFSAN) Creation of a gelatin "sourcing" rule and enforcement of it. This rule should not pussy foot around distinctions such as gelatin can be derived from BSE-free herds, when no one is entirely certain if a herd is BSE free. Gelatin raw materials, at a minimum, should be prohibited from any country known to have BSE. The current guidance has existed for almost 4 years; a regulation is long overdue. Guidelines are insufficient when regulations are not even followed due to lack of enforcement.
- 5) (FDA) Implementation of a rule that dietary supplement manufacturers carry warning labels on their products if those products contain suspect animal parts, and the label should also reveal the country from which they are sourced. FDA must also prepare to implement recalls of such products as new reveal BSE in their herds.
- 6) (FDA) A mandatory, national registration program for manufacturers of dietary supplements, gelatin manufacturers, and dairies. FDA must equip itself with the ability to quickly notify ALL manufacturers potentially affected by TSE. This is merely the first line of defense in a true readiness campaign to act against this disease. Issuing press releases is wholly insufficient for notifying food processors.
- 7) (FDA) Development of country-of-origin meat labeling to ensure that American consumers consuming mammalian meat in restaurants and grocery stores are notified as to the country of origin of that meat. With the list of BSE infected countries or countries with suspect feed practices exploding, consumers deserve to be able to make informed choices about the meat they eat.
- 8) Lastly, the final report must fully disclose how many American consumers, living in the United States, have been exposed to the risk of BSE, through the combination of delay, insufficient guidance, and inadequate enforcement as well as the misunderstanding of how widespread the problem has been overseas. Americans deserve to know the range of true public health costs associated with delay and incomplete barriers.

IN CONCLUSION

USDA and FDA have available to them the science available in the UK and the EU. Public comments reiterating the available science should not be required to support the position that the U.S. should immediately put in place the same safeguards already established in other countries.

As part of USDA's final report responding to the Animal Disease Risk Assessment, Prevention and Control Act, USDA should create a table illustrating the differences between current US policy, European Union policy and UK policy so that the information is readily available to members of Congress, the White House and consumers. Cost of implementation of the rules the U.S. has NOT yet put in place should be included, along with the cost in human lives, medical support, consumer confidence, etc. under the assumption that the U.S. is not successfully shielded from TSEs.

S.T.O.P. - Safe Tables Our Priority looks forward to a re-energized, collaborative campaign on the part of all the governmental agencies working on prevention of BSE to successfully defend the public's health from this threat.

Sincerely,

Laurie Girard

Co-President

Janet Abrams, Representative

S.T.O.P. Safe Tables Our Priority