

SAFE FOOD COALITION

1424 16th St, NW, Suite 604, Washington, DC 20036 202-387-6121

July 12, 2005

Honorable Michael Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to request that you convene and chair public hearings on the risk from Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. As part of this forum, we ask that you outline the steps the U.S. government has taken to control this disease, and to assure that Americans are not subjected to an increased risk of variant Cruetzfeld-Jacob disease.

On January 15, 2004 we wrote to Secretary Veneman making this request. To date, we received no response, nor has the Bush Administration provided an opportunity for the general public and human health experts to present their concerns about BSE to the government officials responsible for making BSE policy.

Beginning with the discovery of a BSE positive bovine in Canada in 2003, U.S. government actions have been notable for the lack of public participation and transparency. You, your predecessor and the employees of USDA have conducted numerous private meetings with cattlemen and representatives of the meat industry. In addition, U.S. government officials have met endlessly with officials of other governments in an effort to restore American beef markets. But there has been no opportunity for American consumers to meet with, offer suggestions and seek responses from our government about our food supply. We cannot think of any food safety issue of this importance where government action has been so subject to special pleading and so cloaked in secrecy.

Media briefings in which representatives of the media are permitted a limited number of questions do not constitute public participation and the filing of comments on interim final rules does not provide an opportunity to explore public views on an issue that, if not addressed adequately, may present a threat to human health. The few hearings on animal identification were limited to the details of the new system, not to the more general concerns raised by the presence of BSE in the U.S. Furthermore, those hearings were conducted in venues convenient to those who raise cattle rather than in population centers convenient to those who purchase and eat beef.

It is hard to make good public policy behind closed doors. U.S. BSE policy has been characterized by multiple mistakes and omissions, which might have been avoided by transparency and public participation. We urge you to conduct public hearings as a means both to improving BSE control policies and meeting your responsibility to represent the interests of all Americans.

Sincerely,

Carol Tucker Foreman
Consumer Federation of America

Caroline Smith DeWaal
Center for Science in the Public Interest

Tony Corbo
Public Citizen

Alison Rein
National Consumers League

Tom Devine
Government Accountability Project

Nancy Donley
Barb Kowalcyk
Safe Tables Our Priority

Sally Greenberg
Consumers Union