

COOL and the Canadian BSE incident

The recent announcement that a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) was found in Canada gives us the opportunity to follow up on our recent discussion of country of origin (COOL) labeling. BSE or as it is commonly called, mad cow disease, first appeared in England in 1985. Once it was determined that BSE caused variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in some people who had eaten infected meat products, beef consumption in England and the rest of Europe dropped significantly.

Could that happen in the U.S.? It could if people became concerned with the integrity of the beef in the meat case in their local grocery store. However, if the COOL legislation were in effect at this time, U.S. consumers who were worried about the disease risk would be able to purchase U.S. beef and avoid the non-U.S. product. Presently, for the most part the only beef that is identified as born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S. are some specialty direct-purchase and organic brands.

According to a May 21, 2003 Reuters news release, some U.S. processors are segregating Canadian cattle from U.S. cattle, while others are conducting business as usual and processing the Canadian cattle they have on hand. Once the immediate supply of Canadian beef is processed, packers and processors will not have to worry about what to do because the U.S. closed its border to Canadian beef on Tuesday, May 20, 2003. When the importing of Canadian beef will resume will depend in part

on what Canadian officials determine the source of the disease to be and how widespread the risk might be.

This Canadian incident provides an illustration of what the COOL legislation will and will not do. Once implemented as a mandatory regulation, COOL will allow U.S. consumers to distinguish U.S. born, raised and slaughtered beef from non-U.S. beef. As long as the U.S. herd remains free of BSE, the label is an assurance to consumers who might be concerned about BSE. However, if a U.S. case were to occur, consumers could use the label to shun the U.S. product.

The Canadians are in the process of tracing the eight year old animal back to the farms where it has been. Canada now has a mechanism in place to provide for the traceability of animals, but this animal was born before the implementation date so the process is more complicated. If BSE were to be identified in a head of cattle that was born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S., COOL does not provide a direct mechanism to trace the animal back to the farm on which it was raised. In fact the COOL legislation prohibits the government from establishing such a traceability regimen.

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