

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

## Mad Cow: Unwelcome Christmas news

The news Tuesday morning, December 23, 2003 was enough to ruin Christmas holiday celebrations for U.S. cattle producers. At a press conference Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman announced that one cow from Mabton, Washington was discovered to have what is commonly called Mad Cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy).

The response to this news was immediate. Countries from around the world, including significant markets for U.S. beef producers, began announcing bans on the importation from beef from the U.S. Cattle prices began to fall by the daily limit with few buyers in sight. Even with expanded daily limits, prices continued to fall. Estimates of the potential costs of the discovery of a single cow were running up into the billions of dollars.

The initial flurry of questions that cropped up in response to the finding of one BSE-infected animal in the U.S. identified a number of important policy issues that will need to be sorted out by producers, consumers, technical experts and governmental officials over the coming weeks and months. Aside from the animal's likely Canadian connection, policy questions about the effectiveness of the U.S. ban on the use of certain cattle feed need to be answered. This is important because disease material in animal feed is the only known means of transmission of the disease in cattle.

In August 1997, the U.S. banned the use of most animal-derived proteins in cattle feed. Significant exclusions from this ban are protein derived from pigs and horses. In addition meat and bone meal which contains brain and spinal cord tissue can be used in the manufacture of horse feed, hog feed, dog food, and feed for other non-ruminant animals. Feed con-

taining the prohibited proteins are to be labeled "Do not feed to cattle or other ruminants."

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in a January 2002 report, "Mad Cow Disease: Improvements in the animal feed ban and other regulatory areas would strengthen U.S. prevention efforts," noted that many feed producing establishments had not been inspected and some of those that had been found out of compliance with the ban requirements had not been re-inspected. Since then USDA has announced 99.9% compliance with the ban requirements. That still leaves a few holes.

In addition, by allowing cattle brain and spinal column material to be used in dog food, horse feed and hog feed, the regulations still leave open the possibility of the unintentional feeding of banned material to cattle, thus exposing them to potential infection. Take the instance of a small operator who has a couple of dogs, a half dozen calves that will be sold as yearlings and a pen of hogs. What is to say that none of the hog feed or dog food will be spilled, swept up, and feed to the calves?

Before the discovery of the potential Canadian origin, a number of the early articles were looking at holes in the current animal feed ban as a potential source of the infection. As a result of problems with BSE a number of other countries have stricter rules on using animal protein material in animal feed than the U.S. Before relaxing, we think it would be prudent to see if a stricter ban on animal feed might not be in order.

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