

Beltway Ideologues Deny Mad-Cow Disease Threat

by Marcia Merry Baker

On March 5, at the Houston Rodeo and Livestock Arena, a show-hearing was held on Mad Cow Disease in North America, by the Agriculture Committee of the House of Representatives, for the Bush Administration to announce a “voluntary” program for identification and tracking of cattle. It is to be implemented in the indefinite future—maybe “sometime next summer.”

This Texas bells-and-whistles event was intended to give the impression that the United States is serious about implementing a disease surveillance and containment program. But on specifics, Keith Collins, U.S. Department of Agriculture Chief Economist, said only that his agency is still working on it; and as to when it will be ready for ranchers, “we are going by the seasons.”

“Pure ideology” was how one veteran farm state Congressman summed up the proceedings. To begin with, the Texas venue was chosen for the Committee field hearing, for the very purpose of pandering to what’s called politically, “Big Beef.” This refers, not generically to family farm cattlemen, but to financial and cartel interests in the beef commodity trade, aligned, to date anyway, with the Bush Presidency. In particular, these interests are infuriated that Japan, South Korea and Canada—the principal importers of U.S. beef—are retaining their ban on U.S. commodities, given safety concerns. Only Mexico has caved in to resuming imports. The other governments continue to reject the many “trust us” statements from Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, and others.

The sorry Houston event is only the latest in a series of Administration policy actions that amount to both a denial of the nature of the disease threat, and a replay of the very deregulation-type ideology practiced by Margaret Thatcher, the original Mad Cow, whose administration (1979-1990) was associated with the outbreak and spread of BSE—bovine spongiform encephalopathy. It is thought that the disease made a species jump from sheep to cows in the early 1980s, under



U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman (right) and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: Nothing to smile about, when it comes to USDA policy on BSE.

deregulated livestock feed conditions, expressly warned against by scientists in the 1970s.

In the end, over 180,000 British cows were confirmed with BSE, two million cattle killed, and over 160 cases of human contraction of the bovine form of the disease—called in humans, variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (vCJD)—have been documented in Britain. The disease is fatal.

Part of the Thatcher Mad Cow legacy, is that infected animals inevitably made their way to other countries. In response, governments in Europe and Japan have instituted new testing and containment programs, while in the United States, only a pretense exists. In Japan, for example, *all domestically raised cows* are tested at slaughter, and meat held back until results are known. So far this year, some 10 animals have tested positive for BSE. No meat recall was required.

Other nations have differing, but serious programs. In Ireland, in the range of 40 BSE cases are found yearly, a number that epidemiologists expect to see falling as the diseased animals die out. In France, half of all cows going to slaughter are tested, using a pattern to maximize surveillance of the national herd inventory, in order to track and contain any disease presence.

But in the United States, only some 20,000 animals a year have been tested, out of over 30 million slaughtered; the meat is not held back. Veneman's order to, now, test 40,000 a year is no change in policy. The two BSE cows identified in North America over the past nine months (in June in Canada, and in December, Washington state), should not have come as a surprise.

What is required is a serious surveillance program of testing cows going to slaughter; and a tagging and tracking system, so that containment can be implemented in the case of

disease. Secondly, a live-animal test must be an R&D priority, to begin to go beyond containment to eradication. Thirdly, sanitation and decontamination technologies are required. It is an irony that with all the Homeland talk of bio-security against potential bio-terrorism, the United States is in a state of outstanding lack of preparedness to handle a clear and present danger in the livestock/food chain.

Most of all, a crash science research program is required to investigate the whole category of the pathology involved in TSEs—transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, now called “prion diseases” after the name given to the sub-cellular mutant protein matter, or “prion,” that is infectious but not a virus nor bacterium.

BSE is not the only TSE documented to exist in North America, in meat animals. Scrapie—the name for the disease in sheep—is present in U.S. flocks, as in many parts of the world. And in the wild, a TSE “wasting disease” is now spreading among white-tail deer, after a species jump from Western mule deer. The point is not that you must necessarily avoid eating lamb, mutton or venison for fear of infection. The point is, that there is a disease threat present, and there are many unknowns. Therefore, government's responsibility is to further the research and health measures required to protect the public interest.

One newly introduced bill in Congress nominally addresses the urgency of facing up to this threat. Senate Bill 2007, sponsored by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), is the “BSE and Other Prion Disease Prevention and Public Health Protection Act” (H.R. 3714IH, in the House of Representatives). But the dominant ideology of denial in the Administration, and by the Congressional majority, is so far prevailing in Washington, D.C.