

**STATEMENT OF DR. RICHARD RAYMOND
USDA UNDERSECRETARY FOR FOOD SAFETY**

Regarding the Safety of the U.S. Food Supply

May 4, 2008

“Good evening. I am Dr. Richard Raymond, Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you the safety of the U.S. beef supply. I want to be sure that you are aware that I will be discussing food safety issues only, and I am not here this evening to discuss negotiations.

“The U.S. Government believes the current agreement well addresses the health and food safety concerns of Korean consumers. It provides for Korea's sovereign right to conduct an audit of our facilities and to work with USDA inspection authorities if any food safety concerns are identified. When the OIE gave the United States "controlled risk" status a year ago, it was after the world's BSE experts reviewed the preventative and food safety measures in the United States.

“Since the requirements to export to Korea are consistent with science, U.S. requirements as well as those of the OIE require that if any food safety concern is found, it would be fully investigated and immediately corrected by USDA.

“I want to assure all consumers – both domestic and abroad – that the U.S. beef supply is among the safest in the world. To help ensure its safety, USDA takes a number of steps to prevent foodborne illness. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) employs over 9,000 personnel, including 7,800 full-time in-plant and other front-line personnel protecting the public health in approximately 6,200 federally inspected establishments nationwide. FSIS personnel must be continuously present for slaughter operations and observe the animal both in motion and at rest before slaughter, and every carcass after slaughter. FSIS also must be present in each processing establishment every shift every day. Under the FSIS verification sampling program, FSIS samples meat, poultry, and processed egg products and analyzes them for the presence of microbial pathogens. To protect against bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the U.S. government also has an interlocking system of safeguards.

Safeguards Against BSE

“I would like to take this opportunity to give you a brief summary of the safeguards against BSE that the United States has in place to protect our food supply.

“Since the discovery of the first case of BSE in Great Britain in 1986, we have learned a tremendous amount about this disease. That knowledge has greatly informed USDA's regulatory systems and response efforts. It has also given us the opportunity to examine our own cattle herd, which is why we know that the risk of BSE in the United States is extremely low.

“The U.S. government's interlocking system of controls to protect the food supply from BSE includes a ban on non-ambulatory disabled cattle since January 2004. On July 12, 2007, FSIS announced a permanent prohibition on the non-ambulatory disabled or “downer” cattle from the food supply, with the exception of otherwise normal, healthy animals that become non-ambulatory because of an acute injury after passing ante-mortem inspection.

“We have learned that the single most important thing we can do to protect human health regarding BSE is the removal from the food supply of specified risk materials (SRMs) – those tissues that, according to scientific evidence, could be infective in a cow with BSE. USDA requires that all SRMs are removed from carcasses so that they do not enter the food supply. Slaughter facilities cannot operate their slaughter operations without the continuous presence of USDA inspection personnel to ensure safe and wholesome product, including the removal, segregation and disposal of SRMs. According to the 2005 Harvard Risk Assessment, SRM removal alone reduces the potential exposure to consumers of BSE by 99 percent. USDA inspectors are stationed at key points along the production line where they are able to directly observe certain SRM removal activities. Other off-line inspection personnel verify additional plant SRM removal, segregation and disposal. Moreover, FDA bans SRMs in FDA-regulated human foods and cosmetics.

“An additional significant step we have taken to prevent the spread of BSE and bring about its eradication in the animal population is the ruminant feed ban. In 1997, the FDA implemented a mandatory feed ban that prohibits feeding most mammalian protein to ruminants, including cattle. This rule was strengthened just recently in a final rule published April 25, 2008. The feed ban is a vital measure to prevent the transmission of BSE to cattle. While the 1997 rule provides a strong primary line of defense against BSE, as evidenced by the extremely low prevalence of BSE in the U.S., the additional measures taken in this final rule, which goes into effect 12 months from the date of publication, will further reinforce the existing rule by removing certain cattle derived materials from all animal feed. This action will minimize any residual BSE risks not eliminated by the 1997 rule, if cross contamination of ruminant feed with non ruminant feed, or diversion of non ruminant feeds to ruminants, were to occur. In fact, this feed ban goes beyond what is required by OIE, and that is significant.

“Another step is BSE testing, which is best used as a surveillance tool. By testing high-risk animals, including those that show possible clinical signs of the disease, we can document the effectiveness of our security measures.

“USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has conducted targeted BSE surveillance testing since 1990, including an enhanced surveillance effort that was initiated after a cow tested positive for the disease in December 2003. The goal of the enhanced effort, which began in June 2004, was to test as many animals in the targeted population of dead, down, or disabled cattle as possible over a 24-month period. Out of over 759,000 animals tested, this intensive effort detected only two additional animals with the disease. Both of those animals were born prior to initiation of the FDA feed ban and neither entered the food supply. This testing confirms an extremely low prevalence of the disease in the United States and the efficacy of the feed banning preventing transmission of BSE to the American herd.

“The enhanced surveillance program provided sufficient data to allow USDA to more accurately estimate the prevalence or level of BSE within the U.S. cattle population. Based on this analysis, we can definitively say that the incidence of BSE in the United States is extremely low. APHIS continues to conduct an ongoing BSE surveillance program targeted to high-risk animals that samples approximately 40,000 high-risk animals annually. This level of surveillance significantly exceeds the guidelines set forth by the World Animal Health Organization, which has affirmed that U.S. regulatory controls against the disease are effective.

“It is because of the strong system that the United States has put in place, and which we continue to work to strengthen, that we can be confident of the safety of our beef supply in regard to BSE and that the spread of BSE has been prevented in this nation.

Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co.

“I also want to discuss with you the undercover video by the Humane Society that was released on January 30. As soon as the video was released, USDA Secretary Schafer called for an investigation into the matter. USDA’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is leading that investigation, with support from FSIS and the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). This investigation is still ongoing, and in the meantime, FSIS has implemented a series of interim actions to verify and thoroughly analyze humane handling activities in federally inspected establishments.

“When we learned of the problems at Hallmark/Westland on January 30, FSIS took immediate steps to determine if the allegations made public by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) were accurate. I also want to stress to you that the animals in the video are in no way indicative of animals that would ever pass ante-mortem inspection.

“Evidence from the ongoing investigation demonstrates that, over the past two years, this plant did not always notify the FSIS public health veterinarian (PHV) when cattle became non-ambulatory after passing ante-mortem (prior to slaughter) inspection, as is required by FSIS regulations. This failure by Hallmark/Westland led to the company’s February 17, 2008, voluntary recall of 143 million pounds of fresh and frozen beef products produced at the establishment since February 1, 2006. Because of the previously explained interlocking safeguards against BSE exposure, it is extremely unlikely that these meat products pose a risk to human health. The recall action was deemed necessary because the establishment did not comply with FSIS regulations. This recall was not about food safety.

“It is important to note that certain cattle, while ambulatory when they pass ante-mortem inspection, may later become non-ambulatory from an acute injury or another circumstance. If such a situation occurs, FSIS regulations require the PHV to inspect the animal again and determine that the animal did indeed suffer from an acute injury before the animal is permitted to go to slaughter. Otherwise, the animal is condemned, does not go to slaughter, and therefore, does not enter the food chain. It is also significant to understand that this plant had five full-time USDA inspectors who were doing their jobs to protect public health. Over the last three years, these inspectors condemned five percent of the cattle that were presented for slaughter. Most of the condemned were as a result of carcass and/or organ inspection post slaughter.

“Last year, humane handling violations resulted in FSIS issuing notices of suspension of inspection, which effectively stop operations at a facility, to 12 of nearly 800 livestock slaughter plants. In 2007, FSIS issued 685 non-compliance records for humane handling issues out of more than 168,000 humane handling verification procedures – demonstrating that there is a very low level of less than egregious activity in plants. In general, these violations are minor and do not affect the safety and wholesomeness of our food supply. USDA believes that operating our inspection system in a transparent manner keeps our consumers informed and helps us strengthen an already strong food safety system.

Further Actions

“The investigation led by OIG with support from FSIS and AMS is ongoing. However, we are not waiting for the completion of the investigation to act.

“USDA has already taken a number of steps to strengthen our inspection system. FSIS has increased the amount of time allocated per shift by inspection program personnel to verify humane handling activities and to verify that animals are handled humanely in ante-mortem areas. FSIS is focusing surveillance and inspection activities at establishments where older or potentially distressed animals are slaughtered, such as facilities that handle dairy or veal cattle. At these facilities, the time spent performing humane handling verification activities will be doubled. At facilities with contracts for for Federal nutrition assistance programs, humane handling verification time is being doubled, regardless of the type or class of the animal slaughtered.

“FSIS is also conducting surveillance activities to observe the handling of animals outside the approved hours of operation from vantage points within and adjacent to the official premises. FSIS has been and will continue to conduct humane handling audits in additional plants across the U.S.

Additional Information

“One last point that I would like to address is regarding a human health issue. I am certain that many of you are aware that an investigation was being conducted to determine the cause of death from a young patient in Virginia who was recently reported in the in the media to have died of variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (vCJD). The epidemiologic characteristics of the illness and preliminary results of the neuropathologic testing of brain tissue obtained at autopsy indicate that the patient did not die of vCJD. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has just provided us with that information, and I felt it was important to share that with you today. An official release once all testing is completed and confirmed is expected soon, but the CDC has allowed me to offer you this preliminary information today.

Conclusion

“Again – I want to stress to all consumers – both domestic and abroad – that U.S. beef is safe. USDA takes a number of steps to prevent foodborne illness. The U.S. government’s interlocking system of controls to protect the food supply from BSE is effective and provide a level of security recognized as significant worldwide.”

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