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March 15, 2004

Dr. Daniel Engeljohn
Executive Associate for Policy Analysis & Formulation
USDA – FSIS
350E Jamie L. Whitten Building
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250
VIA FACSIMILE: 202 720 2025

Dear Dr. Engeljohn:

The American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP) wants to raise some concerns and comments to you following statements that you and Dr. Kenneth Petersen, Deputy Assistant Administrator in Field Operations, have made concerning the vertebral column of cattle as Specified Risk Materials (SRMs).

AAMP plans to include these comments with comments we are submitting concerning FSIS Docket No. 03-025IF, the interim final rule on Prohibition of the Use of Specified Risk Materials for Human Food and Requirements for the Disposition of Non-Ambulatory Disabled Cattle that was published by the Food Safety and Inspection Service in the Federal Register of January 12, 2004.

Our Association has published information on its web site indicating that steaks can safely be cut and separated from the major parts of the vertebral column of cattle, without concern about contamination of the meat as Specified Risk Materials (SRMs). In comments that you and Dr. Petersen have made, you have indicated that in the opinion of FSIS, steaks should not be cut from the vertebral column, in order to limit the exposure of humans to the agent that causes Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE).

At the last USDA-FSIS BSE Seminar for small and very small plants, held on March 6 in Binghamton, NY, you stated that processors cannot cut T-bone steaks first then remove the vertebral column from the anima, but that processors must remove the vertebral column first, and then create "semi-boneless" steaks, i.e. in the loin area where the vertebral column is not exposed. Dr. Kenneth Petersen made similar comments at a meeting of the Western Animal Health & Livestock Association in Reno, Nevada.

In the opinion of AAMP, you should remove your designation of the major parts of the vertebral column as an SRM. We understand that the main reason you have made



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such a designation is that the dorsal root ganglia of cattle are attached to the bones of the vertebral column and aren't removed along with the loosely attached spinal cord. But setting the vertebral column as a SRM because of the strong attachment of the ganglia is not scientifically justified.

The Agency has the power to require inspected plants to fully remove the spinal cord and the ganglia next to it before the carcass leaves slaughter. We think that would be better than declaring the major parts of the vertebral column as inedible.

We understand that seven years ago, Great Britain banned bone-in beef after studies indicated that in experimentally-inoculated cattle, the dorsal root ganglia contained the prion is thought to cause BSE. But two years later, Britain lifted the ban on the sale of bone-in beef because scientists researching how the disease is transmitted came to the conclusion that the potential risk to humans from this prion from bone-in beef was insignificant. The Harvard Study also reported that bone-in beef was a less likely route for human exposure to BSE.

The Harvard Study report said that the estimates are likely to overstate true human exposure because they represent the amount of infectivity presented for human consumption, but do not take into account waste or actual rate of consumption. For example, the reported quantity for potential exposure to infectivity in bone-in beef reflects the present of spinal cord and dorsal root ganglia in a fraction of cuts like T-bone steaks, although the spinal cord and the dorsal root ganglia may never be consumed in these cuts of meat.

Yes, despite the huge occurrence of BSE in Britain, the ban on bone-in beef lasted only a short time and was lifted, even though there was great concern about the safety of British beef. There would not have been such a major change in the British regulation if they had felt there would be danger from bone-in beef.

Putting such a ban in effect in the U.S. cannot be justified scientifically. So we ask that FSIS remove any references to the vertebral column as a Specified Risk Material (SRM). The Agency should merely ask that the spinal cord and dorsal root ganglia be completely removed from cattle by the slaughter establishment.

Sincerely,

Bernard F. Shire, Director,
Legislative & Regulatory Affairs

cc: Hugh Tyler, AAMP President