

# TIMELY INFORMATION

## Agriculture & Natural Resources

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### **BSE Testing Program Takes a Break**

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The BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) Testing program took a break in Alabama in mid-February while the USDA re-evaluates where the program actually needs to be in order to satisfy export partners as well as to ensure consumer confidence at home. Due to the tremendous response by cattle producers in Alabama and around the country, the program has far exceeded expectations, which leaves us at a point of deciding exactly how much testing needs to be done in the future. A great deal of appreciation goes to the cattle producers and veterinarians who made the testing program a success in Alabama. However, for the near future we all need to take a time-out while the future direction and goals of the program are established.

In the spring of 1996, the Minister of Health for England announced that there was a possible link between a new variant of the human Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) and consumption of meat and other products from BSE positive cattle. At that time the United States banned imports of all live cattle and other products from countries known to have BSE in their cattle populations. The U.S. beef industry also implemented other practices to protect our animals and food supply. One of the first protections was to ban the inclusion of rendered ruminant by-products such as meat and bone meal in cattle feed, because this is believed to be the most common way cattle are infected with BSE.

The U.S. also began testing for BSE. In 2001, there were about 5,000 cattle tested for the disease. In 2002, the number increased to 12,500, and then to 20,000 in 2003. In the last quarter of 2003, the USDA decided to enter into cooperative agreements with States to increase the testing level to 40,000 "target" animals (animals that were down, dying, debilitated, or showing signs of central nervous system disease). The 40,000 samples from a high-risk population of target animals would, according to a Harvard University risk assessment, give a 95% level of confidence that if BSE was present in the U.S., it would be found.

In the February 2004 issue of the Alabama Cattleman Magazine, there was a letter from the State veterinarian and the USDA announcing the BSE Testing Program in Alabama. After finding a BSE-positive cow in Washington State in late December of 2003, the goal for sampling was expanded to 268,000 samples, which would provide a 99% confidence level that if the disease was still present at a rate of 1 in 10 million adult animals, we would find it. In 2005, a BSE-positive cow from Texas was found, and in 2006 we had our own case of BSE in Alabama. Since that time hundreds of thousands of samples have been collected in the U.S., and there have been no BSE-positive animals found since the positive cow in Alabama four years ago.

Many thanks are in order for Alabama cattle producers and veterinarians for making the BES Testing Program a success. On a national basis, Alabama has provided BSE diagnostic samples from what are truly considered “target” animals. Such a successful program has helped satisfy export partners as well as to ensure consumer confidence at home. While for now there will be no BSE Testing Program, we must still report any cattle showing signs of central nervous system diseases, such as incoordination, staggering, or strange behavior to local veterinarians, our State veterinarian (334-240-7253) or the USDA Veterinary Services (334-223-7141). Presently, there are no funds to assist with carcass disposal of animals tested for BSE, but stay tuned for updates regarding the new BSE surveillance program.

**Important points about BSE to share with consumers regarding the safety of U.S. beef:**

- Scientific studies show that the BSE infectious agent has never been found in beef muscle meat or milk. Instead, it is found in central nervous system tissue such as brain and spinal cord. Currently, there is mandatory removal of all specified risk materials at processing (brain, spinal cord, central nervous system tissue, etc.), and these items are not found in the beef we consume.
- The U.S. has had a very thorough surveillance program for BSE that targeted high-risk cattle with signs of neurological disease, animals that were non-ambulatory, and animals that were over 30 months of age. Approximately 750,000 U.S. cattle have been tested, but we have not found a BSE-positive animal since 2006.
- BSE affects older cattle, typically over 30 months of age. The vast majority of the cattle going to market in the U.S. are less than 24 months old.
- All U.S. cattle are inspected by a USDA inspector or veterinarian before going to slaughter. Animals with signs of neurological disorders are tested for BSE, and all diseased animals are removed from the food system.
- The U.S. has banned imports of cattle and cattle products from countries with BSE since 1989.
- The only way BSE spreads is through contaminated feed. In 1997, the Food and Drug Administration implemented a ban on feeding ruminant-derived meat and bone meal supplements to cattle. This would prevent the spread of BSE to other animals if it were present in the U.S.