

Why America Is Extremely Vulnerable To Mad Cow Disease

Wolf Richter|April 26, 2012|



“The US is one of two major beef-exporting countries with no comprehensive traceability system,” [said](#) Erin Borrer, an economist at the US Meat Export Federation, which had commissioned a [study](#) to assess the implications of traceability for international markets. The other country, by the way, is India.

The issue was Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, or BSE, more descriptively called Mad Cow Disease. Humans can contract it by eating contaminated beef. And it's fatal.

BSE was the scourge of the 90s, particularly in the UK, but also in France and elsewhere. In 1992, the peak year, 37,311 [cases](#) were identified. It triggered drastic changes in the beef industry and ultimately led to comprehensive traceability programs among major exporters: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, and Uruguay all have them, and use them as a strategic advantage. Top import markets, such as the EU, Japan, and South Korea, also have them.

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But not the US. Which “places the US at risk if an animal-disease outbreak occurs in this country, or if import customers impose traceability requirements,” Borrer said. That was last November.

On April 18, a [truckload](#) of cows that had died arrived at a transfer facility in Hanford, [CA](#), on their way to a rendering plant where they would be turned into bath soap or whatever, rather than pink slime and other delectable products for human consumption. Samples were taken from a

dairy cow in that batch under the USDA's BSE surveillance system that tests annually about 40,000 high-risk cows—they have to be over 30 months old and dead.

Amazingly, none of the millions of cows slaughtered every year for human consumption are tested for BSE. Not only does the USDA refuse to test them, it also inexplicably *prohibits* companies from testing them—a handicap for exporters.

The samples were forwarded to the food safety lab at the University of California, Davis. On April 19, after the results indicated that the cow could have BSE, the samples were sent to a USDA lab in Iowa for additional tests. On April 24, the world *finally* [learned](#) that the US had its fourth mad cow.

Federal and state government PR machines went into overdrive. It was "atypical" BSE, result of a natural mutation, rather than the calamitous "classical" BSE associated with infected feed—which would put every cow in that herd at risk. But the USDA wasn't sure, actually, and would send samples to labs in the UK and Canada for further testing. Of course, it never presented "a risk to the food supply or human health," the USDA [confirmed](#). And it remained "confident in the health of the national herd and the safety of beef and dairy products."

Problem solved. No testing of cows destined for human consumption. No comprehensive traceability program. Because of the costs. But at least, the US banned the primary source of BSE: feed made from ruminants. Um, a cow can be turned it into feed for chickens or pigs that then can end up in feed for cows, which "could allow for the spread of mad cow disease," the Consumers Union [warned](#).

When the first BSE case in the US was discovered in December 2003, Japan, one of the largest markets for US beef, immediately blocked *all* imports of US beef. December 2005, under intense pressure, Japan reopened its market, but with a slew of safeguards, including a requirement that cows must be no older than 20 months. When an exporter violated a rule a month later by shipping a forbidden vertebral column, Japan closed its market to *all* US beef for *seven months*. When a US packer couldn't document that the intestines in a shipment were from cattle no older than 20 months, the packer was [banned](#) for over a year. Beef jerky and other processed beef products are *still* banned. For how public health is intertwined with protectionism in the insular society of Japan, and for the impact that cracking open that market has had, read... [The Real Reason for Deflation in Japan](#).

Japan had 29 [BSE cows](#) by October 2006. But now all Japanese beef can be traced from the store to the calf, thanks to its comprehensive traceability program. Japan also tests every cow slaughtered for human consumption. If a cow is found to be infected, all cows in the herd can be immediately identified, and the meat can be traced to grocery stores around the country.

The laborious negotiations to get Japan to change its 20-month requirement to the internationally accepted 30-month limit—a big issue for US beef exporters—had been near a successful conclusion when the BSE announcement poured cold water on it.

South Korea, the fourth largest market for US beef, also banned beef imports from the US in 2003—along with China and some other countries. When Korea finally lifted the ban in 2008, street protests erupted that went on for months as people feared for their health. And now Home Plus and Lotte Mart, the second and third largest supermarket chains, [pulled](#) their US beef off the shelves to calm their worried customers.

In 2011, US beef exports [amounted](#) to \$5.42 billion. Losing access to some of those markets along with a BSE-inspired drop in domestic demand would be tough for the industry. But that may be the cost of trying to save some money by eschewing comprehensive traceability and large-scale testing. Astounding that the industry and government can't trace a few million cows though they're already eagerly tracing the minutest aspects of *our* behavior, movements, actions, and communications. And there are over 300 million of us. Read... [Big Brother Everywhere](#).

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