

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



MEDIA ADVISORY

For Immediate Release
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**Chairmen Davis, Goodlatte to Hold Joint
Hearing on Revised Mad Cow Surveillance Program**

What: Government Reform Committee and Agriculture Committee oversight hearing: "A Review of USDA's Expanded BSE Cattle Surveillance Program"

When: WEDNESDAY, JULY 14, 2004, 10:00 A.M.

Where: ROOM 2154, RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Background:

The Committee on Government Reform will conduct a joint hearing with the Committee on Agriculture regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) Expanded Surveillance Plan. BSE is commonly known as "mad cow disease." **The hearing will examine USDA's recently implemented expanded surveillance plan and USDA's efforts to detect the prevalence of BSE in the U.S. cattle population.**

The first case of mad cow disease was discovered in Europe in 1986 and reached its epidemic peak in 1993. In 1997, FDA took a proactive step in establishing a feed ban, despite the fact that BSE had not occurred in the U.S. cattle population. The ban prohibited the use of meat and bone meal from dead ruminants (cows, sheep, and goats) in feed for live animals. BSE is spread primarily through cattle eating the byproduct of a BSE-infected carcass.

For the past decade, USDA's BSE surveillance program focused on high-risk cattle populations where the disease is most likely to be found, including cattle symptomatic of central nervous system disorders, non-ambulatory cattle, and those that die on farms. BSE is a disorder that has been linked to the debilitating neurological condition in humans known as variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. On December 23, 2003, USDA announced the first U.S. case of BSE had been discovered in Washington

state. One week later, on December 30, 2003, Agriculture Secretary Veneman announced additional safeguards to protect the food supply from BSE, including a ban on downer cattle. Downer cattle, defined by USDA as non-ambulatory animals that cannot rise from a recumbent position or cannot walk, were previously approved for human consumption. USDA also prohibited the presence of specified risk materials (SRM) in human food. SRMs, high-risk tissue, are primarily contained in the head and spinal column in cattle 30 months or older. In addition, Secretary Veneman requested the International Review Subcommittee of the Foreign Animal and Poultry Disease Advisory Committee to review USDA's response to the BSE-infected cow and make recommendations as to USDA's existing policy on BSE surveillance.

On February 2, 2004, the Subcommittee presented its findings to Secretary Veneman. The report advised that "the surveillance programme in the USA must be significantly extended in order to measure the magnitude of the problem." It specifically recommended a one-year enhanced surveillance program targeting high-risk population cattle, testing all downer cows over 30 months of age for mad cow disease, and that the United States strongly consider random sampling among healthy cattle. **On February 17, 2004, Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Waxman sent a joint letter to Secretary Veneman urging USDA to follow the recommendations of the independent experts or provide the Committee with a compelling reason for not doing so.**

On March 15, 2004, USDA announced its expanded BSE surveillance plan with the goal of determining whether BSE is actually present in the cattle population and if so, at what level. The plan accepted several of the Subcommittee's recommendations, including a one-year effort to better ascertain the presence of BSE in the U.S., which includes the random sampling and testing of 20,000 apparently healthy cattle aged 30 months and older. In addition, USDA will be sampling as many adult cattle from the high-risk population as possible in the next 12-18 months. Participation in the plan is voluntary. USDA claims if a total of 268,500 samples are tested under the plan, there is a 99% confidence level of identifying one BSE-infected cattle in 10 million.

USDA has approved and is currently using a rapid turnaround test for the sampling program. The rapid tests will alleviate the previous problem of not receiving a conclusive test result for several weeks. In addition, carcasses from cattle tested for BSE must be held until a negative test result is obtained. The new "test and hold" policy alleviates the past burden of a recall of a BSE positive carcass. Since full implementation of the plan on June 1, 2004, two inconclusive test results have come back as negative for BSE.

The hearing will examine USDA's plan and efforts to detect the prevalence of BSE in the U.S. cattle population. The hearing will also examine concerns regarding the written protocols of the plan and the management of its implementation. In addition, concerns exist as to whether the methodology surrounding USDA's assumption that it will be able to identify one BSE positive cow in 10 million is accurate.

This hearing is the culmination of the Government Reform Committee's seven-month investigation into USDA's response to the BSE-infected cow in Washington state and the subsequent changes made to USDA's surveillance program. The Committee will continue to conduct oversight as the Plan moves forward.

Witnesses:

Panel One:

The Honorable Ann M. Veneman, Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Accompanied by:

Dr. Ron DeHaven, Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Dr. Keith Collins, Chief Economist, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Panel Two:

The Honorable Phyllis K. Fong, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Panel Three:

Dr. Gary M. Weber, Executive Director, Regulatory Affairs, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Mr. Jim Hodges, President, American Meat Institute Foundation

Dr. George M. Gray, Executive Director, Harvard Center for Risk Analysis

Dr. Peter G. Lurie, Deputy Director, Public Citizen's Health Research Group

NOTE: Live webcast will be available at the start of the hearing, and can be accessed at <http://reform.house.gov/GovReform/AboutUs/multimedia.htm>

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