

BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY
INFORMATION ON THE DISEASE AND MEASURES TO PROTECT
HUMAN AND ANIMAL HEALTH

Statement made by the European Community
at the meeting of 29-30 may 1996

I. Introduction

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) is a disease of cattle that first appeared in November 1986 in the United Kingdom and progressively took epidemic proportions in the UK's cattle herd during most of the 1980s. BSE is akin to similar diseases of other animal species, such as scrapie, which affects sheep, and Creutzfeldt-Jacob, which is a human disease. The infective agents that cause this kind of diseases, including the BSE agent, have not been identified: their nature is still unknown, albeit scientific research is advancing fast in trying to achieve better knowledge of the diseases and tests for their detection.

It is widely thought that BSE in the United Kingdom was triggered by changes in the rendering processes, that is the production methods used to obtain meat-and-bone meal from animal materials, in the early 1980s. Because meat-and-bone meal is used as feedingstuff for cattle, these changes, especially the lowering of the processing temperature during rendering, are believed to have resulted either in the transmission of the sheep's scrapie agent to cattle or in the multiplication and spread of a previously unidentified disease of cattle itself.

In the wake of the UK epidemic, in the early 1990s, a small number of sporadic cases, deemed to be related to imports of meat-and-bone meal or live cattle from the United Kingdom, have been registered in some countries, including EU Member States (Ireland, France, Germany, Denmark, Portugal, Italy) as well as non-EU countries and territories (Switzerland, Oman, the Falkland Islands, Canada). In the Member States concerned and in most of other countries affected, the policy has been to deal with these limited cases with strong measures such as destruction of meat-and-bone meal and slaughter of the whole herds in which animals affected with BSE were detected.

After the first, fast spread of the epidemic in the United Kingdom, the UK authorities began to apply measures to slow down the disease. In July 1988, a prohibition to feed meat-and-bone meal to ruminants, including cattle, was introduced. In June 1989, this first measure was supplemented by a prohibition on the use in human food of certain cattle tissues widely recognized as most likely to carry the infection ("specified bovine offals" or SBOs: brain, spinal cord, tonsils, thymus, spleen and, later, the intestines). SBOs were also excluded from the production of meat-and-bone meal, and thus from the cattle diet, in 1990.

The UK measures have cooperated in reducing the number of detected cases, which have been decreasing by 40 per cent every year since their implementation. However, some contamination of cattle feed is likely to have continued, as the disease has been registered in animals born after the 1988 and 1990 prohibitions.

BSE and BSE-like symptoms have also appeared in the United Kingdom in several zoo animals as well as in cats, this being generally attributed to consumption of meat-and-bone meal or raw offal. Through scientific experiments, BSE-like syndromes have also been induced in mice. Although it could be assumed that dogs have also been exposed to the BSE agent in food, no case has been recorded. The cattle materials which have transmitted the infection in the later cases are brain, spinal cord, ileum and retina. No infectivity has ever been detected in milk and milk products. Infectivity has not been found in muscle meat and several miscellaneous cattle tissues.

BSE can only be detected in live animals which show external signs of disease: furthermore, BSE in these animals can only be confirmed through autopsy. There is no test available for the detection of the disease in live, apparently healthy animals. However, the UK Government has spent over 1 million pounds in developing a diagnostic test.

No evidence has been found of transmission of BSE to humans.

II. Measures adopted by the European Union before March 1996

The EU began to take European-wide measures against BSE in March 1989. The European measures have been targeted at the protection of cattle as well as at protecting European consumers against any hypothetical possibility of transmission of the disease from cattle. They have strictly followed the recommendations of the Commission's Scientific committees, which themselves have been working on the basis of the results of experiments performed and communicated by the United Kingdom and also to other sources of scientific information available. They have been stricter than the recommendations for minimum protection measures that have been issued by international bodies such as the World Health Organization and the International Office for Epizootics.

Up to March 1996, trade in cattle and meat from the United Kingdom was only permitted under the following conditions, specified by the Scientific committees:

- live calves under six months old could be exported to the rest of the EU provided they were slaughtered no later than at six months of age,
- beef from animals less than 30 months old, as well as animals more than this age which had never been in a herd harbouring BSE cases in the previous six years could be traded without restriction,
- meat from the rest of UK animals could be exported to the rest of the EU if it was deboned and had visible nervous and lymphatic tissues removed,
- the SBOs and other tissues were prohibited from trade.

The United Kingdom was required to apply equivalent conditions to exports to non-EU countries.

The use of materials from any mammalian animal in the production of cattle and other ruminant feed was also prohibited throughout the EU, and minimum parameters for the rendering of cattle and other ruminant material were laid down for the whole of the Union.

III. The 22 March 1996 scientific advice and Commission decision 96/239/EEC

On 20 March 1996, the United Kingdom Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), after considering ten cases of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease in younger people identified in the United Kingdom, declared the following:

"Although there is no direct evidence of a link, on current data and in the absence of any credible alternative the most likely explanation at present is that these (human) cases are linked to exposure to BSE before the introduction of the SBO ban in 1989. This is cause for great concern."

After the publication of this information and the measures subsequently announced by the United Kingdom, other Member States provisionally banned the entry into their territory of live cattle, meat and products from the United Kingdom.

The Commission immediately submitted the SEAC advice to the Scientific Veterinary Committee, which examined the data presented to them by the UK scientists. On 22 March, the Scientific Committee reached the following specific conclusions:

- The data submitted by the UK scientists "do not at present provide evidence that BSE is transmissible to man. However, the Committee, having always considered the possibility of transmissibility of the BSE agent to humans, recognizes the need to review the adequacy of the current Community measures in the light of the new information".
- The measures taken by the EU since 1990 following the advices of the Committee "are important in reducing the risk of exposure of man to the agent of BSE". "Further reduction of the risk of spread of the BSE agent can be achieved by excluding from the food chain animals most likely to have been exposed to infection, and therefore, harbouring infectivity".
- "Current research should urgently be reviewed with a view to identifying its contribution to existing knowledge on Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs), and establishing critical areas for further work. The Committee considers that, in particular, comprehensive research on the question of transmissibility of BSE to humans remains an urgent priority. After eight years of experience, this essential question is still unresolved."
- "Having regard to the importance of the disease, any practical measure taken by the European Community to address the incidence of the disease and the possible risk of transmission is to be welcomed".

In order to reduce as far as possible any risk of exposure to the BSE agent, to restore consumer confidence and to re-establish the Internal Market, the Commission, acting on the positive advice of the Standing Veterinary Committee on 25-26 of March, adopted a decision to prohibit, pending an overall examination of the situation, the trade to Member States and export to non-EU countries from the United Kingdom of the following:

- live cattle, their semen and embryos,
- meat of cattle slaughtered in the United Kingdom,

- products obtained from cattle slaughtered in the UK which are liable to enter the animal feed or human food chain, and materials destined for use in medicinal products, cosmetics or pharmaceutical products,
- mammalian-derived meat-and-bone meal.

It was noted that milk and milk products, which the World Health Organization has confirmed pose no risk in respect of BSE, are not included in that prohibition.

The Commission decision invited the United Kingdom to present further proposals to control BSE in its territory.

IV. Further measures

The later Commission invitation was aimed at allowing the United Kingdom to put together a set of measures and proposals which would seriously address the question of risk to public or animal health. The first step in this direction was the UK prohibition of meat from cattle over 30 months of age entering any food or feed chain.

The second step was the UK prohibition on the use of mammalian materials to all farm animals including fish. Further steps will be taken in terms of selective slaughter of herds or animals most likely to having been exposed to infected meat-and-bone meal, according to the advice of the Scientific Committee.

All these measures and directions were confirmed in the conclusions of the Council of Ministers on BSE of 1st to 3rd of April 1996. The Council identified three main types of action to be carried out:

- UK cattle older than 30 months of age should not enter the human food or animal feed chains or be used for the production of cosmetic or pharmaceutical products. SBOs from animals less than 30 months of age at slaughter shall be disposed of in such a way as to exclude them from the food and feed chains as well.

The Commission has already adopted a decision on the EU financing of the purchase of UK animals older than 30 months for destruction.

- A Commission decision will be adopted to require that all animal waste from mammalian animals in the European Union be processed by a method that has been demonstrated to inactivate the agents of scrapie and BSE.
- The United Kingdom, according to the Commission decision and to the advice of the Scientific Committee, will present by 30 April at the latest, a proposal for selective slaughter of animals and/or herds identified as being most likely to have been exposed to infected meat-and-bone meal, to be adopted by the Commission.

At its meeting on 29-30 April the Council confirmed this package.

On 20 May the United Kingdom submitted a proposal for a selective slaughter of animals most likely to have been exposed to infected meat and bone meal in accordance with the above-mentioned Council conclusions. This proposal is currently being discussed within the framework of the Standing Veterinary Committee. A Portuguese plan for eradicating BSE in Portugal is also being discussed in that framework.

This package of measures will reinforce protection of human and animal health in the European Union and help restore the European citizens' confidence in the safety of food.

The Commission has also considered it necessary, in accordance with the advice of the Scientific Committee, to give research on BSE a high priority and ensure that the best scientific resources available are put to the task of giving a definitive answer to the question of possible transmission of BSE to humans. It has therefore decided to set up a special group of highly regarded independent scientists which will make recommendations on research priorities.

The Commission will invite third countries to carefully examine the documents submitted to the Committee which should satisfy our trading partners that the measures taken by the European Community are sufficient for the protection of public and animal health.

The Commission has taken the initiative to organize a seminar on BSE on 10 June at which occasion our trading partners will be given an opportunity for a full presentation of the Community measures and a subsequent discussion.