

07/11/2003 Entry: "FSA Recommends BSE Testing"

- The UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) has recommended that the current Over Thirty Months (OTM) rule should be replaced with BSE testing of cattle older than thirty months in two stages. As it stands, all cattle aged over 30 months are destroyed to keep them out of the human food chain.

However, cattle born after August 1996 could be allowed into the food chain, after being tested for BSE, at the earliest from January 2004, with the possibility of complete replacement of the rule from July 2005.

The board said that because of the need for effective implementation of the proposed changes, ministers should not change the OTM rule until they were satisfied that the necessary preparations had been made by the relevant government departments, industry and other agencies throughout the UK. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is responsible for taking these arrangements forward.

The Over Thirty Months rule on UK beef and imports remains in force until any changes are implemented. If the OTM rule is replaced, any cattle testing positive for BSE would have to be destroyed.

The other main controls are to remain unchanged. These are the Specified Risk Material (SRM) control, which removes 99 per cent of any infectivity that may be present in cattle, and the ban on feeding meat-and-bone meal to cattle.

The FSA board also agreed that an independent review would report monthly on the BSE testing system and a final report would be published. The agency's decision follows a year-long review of the OTM rule, which began in July 2002 with the setting up of a stakeholder group. The group's final report, considered at a public meeting in March this year and subject to a three month UK-wide consultation, has been key to informing the Board's decision.

The board agreed with the stakeholder group that the difference in risk to public health between the OTM rule and the testing of all OTM cattle was very small, but the costs of maintaining the OTM scheme are very large.

Sir John Krebs, chair of the FSA board said: "Variant CJD is a terrible disease and in reviewing the controls the Agency has to ensure that public health is effectively protected.

"We have examined the evidence thoroughly and listened carefully during the consultation. We have had to balance the possibility of a very small increase in risk from a move to testing, with the very large costs associated with the OTM rule. We were also mindful that 99 per cent of any possible infectivity is removed by other BSE controls and that there has been a continual and steep decline of BSE in the UK.

“The controls are proving to be effective but public confidence can only be maintained through vigilance and transparency. That is why we will be conducting an independent review of the new controls and that will be made public.

“Our view is that replacing the OTM rule with testing is acceptable on public health grounds. However, Ministers should not change the rule until they are satisfied that the necessary preparations have been made and the date of change should be dependent on that.”