

12/23/2003 Entry: "R-CALF USA Pleased With OIE's Application of Science in Determining Nations' BSE Risk Status"

R-CALF United Stockgrowers of America

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R-CALF USA's European Tour: Part I of II

R-CALF USA Pleased With OIE's Application of Science in Determining Nations' BSE Risk Status

(Billings, MT) R-CALF United Stockgrowers of America (R-CALF USA) C.E.O. Bill Bullard returned from the first meeting organized by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) - Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) between the United States cattle and beef industries and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) in Paris, France. Joined by beef industry representatives from the National Meat Association, American Meat Foundation, American Meat Institute, Meat Export Federation, and National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Bullard participated in meetings with officials from APHIS, the OIE, a French packing plant, French cattle producers, and French government officials December 15-16, 2003 in Paris and Le Mans France.

Bullard said the outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in France and other European countries motivated the European Union (EU) to adopt sophisticated mandatory animal identification and country of origin labeling systems. The EU has developed an animal "passport" system requiring individual passports for all livestock, which passports are associated with identical, bar-coded ear tags in both ears of cattle. The system provides information regarding the country in which the animal was born, raised, and slaughtered as well as the animals breed, age, and sex. "The French producers told us that member countries in the EU are using the mandatory labeling system as a competitive tool to build consumer loyalty for beef born and raised in their respective country," said Bullard.

"It was interesting to learn that while the European Union has adopted a standardized animal identification system used by all member countries, individual member countries are free to adopt differing BSE risk mitigation policies," Bullard explained. He said the EU policy is to test every animal over 30 months of age for BSE if it is destined for human consumption. "France, however, has adopted a more stringent policy of testing all animals over 24 months of age," he said.

Officials at the OIE briefed APHIS and the U.S. cattle and beef industry representatives on the OIE's mission which includes the development of standards used by its 162-member countries to protect themselves against disease incursions. For BSE, the standards are categorized according to a country's risk status and OIE recommends various risk mitigation measures that increase in severity as a country moves from a lower-risk category to a higher-risk category. Bullard said that R-CALF USA is most concerned that the OIE remain a science-based organization independent of political pressure. "The level of risk associated with BSE must be established by science, while the decision regarding what level of risk a member country is willing to accept should be left to the political process within the member-country," he said, adding, "I was pleased to learn that OIE maintains that the science behind its international BSE standards remains valid."

Bullard said that from 1989 to mid-2003, the United States maintained a zero-risk policy using the OIE's risk categories as its scientific basis. "Until this August, our policy was to allow imports only from countries which met the BSE free categories of the OIE." In August of 2003, the USDA relaxed its zero-risk policy and began accepting imports of certain beef products from Canada even though Canada no longer meets the OIE's BSE-free categories. "This visit to the OIE reinforced our position that the United States has relaxed its position regarding the level of risk it is willing to accept while the basic science establishing the actual risk has remained unchanged," Bullard said.

"Thus," said Bullard, "The decision to relax our import restrictions with Canada was politically motivated and not based on any new internationally accepted science." Bullard told the participating APHIS officials that the BSE issue clearly defines the differences between the U.S. live cattle industry and the U.S. beef industry. He said that U.S. cattle producers realize no additional benefit by accepting anything less than a zero-risk policy towards the Canadian BSE case. "If we relax our current zero-risk policy, U.S. live cattle prices will be reduced due to increased supplies of both beef and live cattle from Canada. If, by accepting this increased risk, the BSE agent is introduced in the U.S., the U.S. cattle industry will suffer even more. There are no up-sides for U.S. cattle producers for taking any additional risk," he said.

However, Bullard said the packer has a very different interest in accepting more risk. He explained that the packer stands to benefit immediately by accepting more risk because it immediately increases the available supplies of both beef and live cattle, thereby reducing the demand and the price of domestic cattle and beef. If the BSE agent is introduced in the U.S., he said the packer's supply of beef would remain unchanged, and the only factor affecting their continued profitability would be whether consumer confidence was affected. "Thus, from the packers' perspective, accepting greater risk means immediate benefits and minimal drawbacks," he said.

Bullard explained that the issue facing the United States is whether to relax its zero-risk policy towards BSE despite the fact that the international science supporting its zero-risk policy, as adopted by the OIE, remains unchanged. “We’re in a political battle over whether to relax our current standards and it’s clear that the greatest risk falls to the U.S. cattle producer,” he said.

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R-CALF USA, the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America is a national, non-profit cattle association representing cattle producers in the areas of trade and marketing. R-CALF USA has approximately 9,000 individual members in 46 states and 52 affiliated local and state cattle and farm organizations. For more information, visit www.r-calfusa.com or call 406-252-2516.