

Feeding Livestock to Livestock

Why Would the EU Risk a Mad Cow Sequel?

The mad cow crisis will go down in history as one of the worst food safety scares of the 20th century. More than a decade since it broke out in the UK, BSE has claimed the lives of 200 people in 11 countries, including 165 in the UK – beginning with 19-year-old aspiring Royal Air Force navigator Stephen Churchill.

Some 180,000 cattle in the UK have been infected, along with 5,000 more in 28 other countries in Europe, North America, Asia and the Middle East. Countries reporting new cases in 2007 include Canada, Ireland, Japan and Slovenia. More than 5 million cattle have been preemptively slaughtered to prevent further spread of the disease, which is almost always fatal to people and animals.

No one knows precisely what caused BSE or when the outbreak will end – if ever. Because of BSE’s long incubation time, a person infected with the mad cow pathogen might not develop symptoms for 50 years or more.

After paying such costs to human life, farming economies and trust in Europe’s food production system, one would think a valuable lesson would have been learned: livestock should not be ground up and fed to other livestock.

Yet, astoundingly, this is what some EU officials are now proposing to allow.

Seeking a loophole to the EU’s 2001 ban on feeding animal protein to livestock, two EU panels believe it is safe to feed left-over poultry parts to pigs and vice versa. The opinions of the European Economic and Social Committee¹ and the Scientific Panel on Biological Hazards² go squarely against the prevention-minded rationale behind the ban, which was to “extinguish BSE” and make sure Europeans would never suffer through anything like it again.

Even though BSE-type diseases have never been detected in pigs or poultry, the European Council ruled in 2001 that they should not be fed animal protein – nor should any other type of livestock. One reason for this zero-tolerance policy is that transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, or TSEs, of which BSE is just one type, are unpredictable and poorly understood.



An EU scientific committee has said an as-yet undetected TSE already may be present in some pigs and poultry. Just as worrisome, the committee said animals currently immune from TSEs could lose this immunity if they are fed enough infected feed. “Recycling of animal material,” the committee said, “will increase the risk that cases [will] occur.”³

Pigs and poultry may, in fact, already be susceptible. In one study, pigs fed BSE-infected feed did not contract the disease, but when it was injected into their bodies, 7 of 10 pigs contracted it. Chickens fed and injected BSE-infected feed did not contract the illness, but some birds suffered a movement disorder that has never before been documented.⁴

Such findings led the scientific committee to conclude: “The experience of the emergence of BSE is a vivid illustration of the need to consider precautionary measures.”⁵

What’s Really in the Feed?

Another major reason the European Council banned all livestock-to-livestock feeding is the difficulty keeping

high- and low-risk feed separate. The highest-risk feed is meat-and-bone meal from slaughtered cows, which caused the BSE outbreak when “MBM” from infected cows was fed to other cows. To make MBM, brains, bones, internal organs, inedible meat, fetuses and other animal pieces remaining after slaughter – essentially everything but the hair, hooves and hide – are dried, cooked down to a fine powder and added to animal feed.

Even though it is considered low risk, the use of MBM from pigs and poultry was banned due to intentional and accidental cross-contamination with MBM from cows. The European Commission acknowledged having “serious doubts about whether the separation of feed is being done properly.”⁶ At least until January 2001, cross-contamination was “widespread” in many Member States.⁷

In France in 1999, for example, pig and poultry feed was found to have been contaminated with cow parts (as well as residue from toilets and septic tanks, and sludge from waste treatment plants).⁸ Such cross-contamination has been linked to new BSE cases in parts of France with large pig populations.⁹ These problems led the United States to ban the importation of all MBM from Europe in 2000.

Other unknowns deepen the risk of loosening the ban:

- Currently, it is not possible to determine the origin of animal protein in feed.¹⁰ So protein from cows could be passed off as protein from pigs or poultry.
- It is not known how much animal protein could be added to the feed supply without triggering new BSE risks.¹¹
- There is no way to ensure a certain MBM production method will always produce safe feed – and this may never be possible.¹²
- Scientists do not know how much BSE-contaminated meat is required to infect a person.¹³

These concerns led an EU scientific committee to conclude: “An effective system that prevents the uncontrolled dispersion of slaughter by-products in the environment is important to preserve human and animal health.”¹⁴

Though neither the European Commission nor the European Parliament has so far formally proposed loosening the ban on feeding one ground-up animal to another, the opinion by the two EU panels that animal protein can safely be added to livestock feed should be of great concern to all European consumers.

What You Can Do...

Tell the European Commission to preserve the EU’s ban on feeding livestock to livestock, and to disallow any loopholes such as feeding poultry parts to pigs, and vice versa.

Send your comments to EU Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou at:

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Endnotes

¹ The European Economic and Social Committee is an advisory committee comprised of representatives from business, farming, consumer and labor organisations. It has no formal power but has some influence over EU public policy. (For a list of members and other information, see www.eesc.europa.eu)

² The Scientific Panel on Biological Hazards (BIOHAZ Panel) advises the European Food Safety Authority on biological hazards to food, including food-borne diseases, animal diseases transmissible to humans, and issues related to microbiology, food hygiene and waste management. (For a list of members and other information, see www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/ScientificPanels/efsa_locale-1178620753812_BIOHAZ.htm)

³ Intra-Species Recycling – Opinion on: the risk born by recycling animal by-products as feed with regard to propagating TSE in non-ruminant farmed animals. *Scientific Steering Committee*, Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General, European Commission, 17 September 1999.

⁴ Matthews, D. and Cooke, B.C. “The potential for transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in non-ruminant livestock and fish.” *Rev. sci. tech. Off. int. Epiz.*, 22(1):283-296, 2003.

⁵ European Commission, 1999.

⁶ Osborn, Andrew. “Animal feed ban as Europe acts on BSE.” *The Guardian* (London), 5 December 2000.

⁷ “Use of processed animal proteins in animal feed.” European Commission, DG SANCO.

⁸ “French report finds waste in animal feed.” Reuters, 9 June 1999.

⁹ Abrial, D. et al. “Poultry, pig and the risk of BSE following the feed ban in France – a spatial analysis.” *Veterinary Research*, 36(4):615-628, 2005.

¹⁰ EFSA Opinion on the BSE related public health risks of certain animal proteins in animal feed.” European Food Safety Authority, 15 November 2007.

¹¹ European Food Safety Authority, 2007.

¹² “Updated scientific report on the safety of meat-and-bone meal derived from mammalian animals fed to non-ruminant food producing farm animals.” *Scientific Steering Committee*, Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General, European Commission, 24-25 September 1998.

¹³ “Opinion: Oral Exposure of Humans to the BSE Agent: Infective Dose and Species Barrier.” *Scientific Steering Committee*, Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General, European Commission, 13-14 April 2000.

¹⁴ Report on: The Risk Born by Recycling Animal By-Products as Feed with Regard to Propagating TSE’s in Non-ruminant Farmed Animals. Prepared by a Working Group for the Scientific Steering Committee as an input in the elaboration of the opinion on the same subject adopted on 16-17 September 1999. (See Reference 1.)

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