

Bush Administration Mad Cow Disease Prevention REPORT CARD

June 22, 2004

Prepared by:
Center for Food Safety • Consumers Union
The Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Foundation • Friends of the Earth
Government Accountability Project
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy-Action • Public Citizen

PRIORITY ACTION

GRADE

1. Testing All Cattle 20 Months or Older for Mad Cow Disease

D

While USDA officials have said they would increase testing of cattle from 20,000 to approximately 268,000 per year, this is less than 1% of all the cattle slaughtered each year in this country and does not include all older animals. Cattle as young as 20 months of age have been identified with mad cow disease in other countries. To maximize the effectiveness of the surveillance program, and to make it less likely that infected cattle make it into the food supply, every cow over the age of 20 months should be tested at slaughter. USDA's decision to withhold all beef that is in the process of being tested from the food supply is a long overdue step, but the number of cattle being tested falls far short of what is needed.

2. Allowing Beef Producers to Test Their Cattle for Mad Cow Disease

F

The USDA has adamantly opposed requests by private cattle producers for permission to test their cattle voluntarily. Private testing would supplement government testing without costing taxpayers. It could increase the safety of the food supply by potentially finding and removing more diseased animals. It would also allow producers to recover lost export markets or serve niche markets in the U.S. where customers want more testing than currently planned by the U.S. government. The USDA has claimed that more testing would "imply a consumer safety aspect that is not scientifically warranted," but customers know that more testing means statistically that more mad cows are likely to be found and removed from the food chain. This would increase food safety.

3. Ensuring That Feed Restrictions Prevent Mad Cow Disease

D

In January, FDA proposed new regulations to keep cattle parts from being fed to cattle and to keep high risk material out of our food, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. But five months have passed and the administration has yet to submit the proposal to the Federal Register to begin the public comment process. The administration's delay is

putting our safety in jeopardy. In addition, the proposal has a loophole allowing salvaged pet food to be fed to cattle. It also fails to prohibit feeding of mammals, such as pigs and deer to cattle, as recommended by an international advisory panel convened by the USDA. The FDA did testify to Congress in April that enforcement funds should be increased by more than \$8 million to a total of more than \$30 million.

4. Keeping All Downer Animals out of Food and Feed

B

The USDA has established a policy that now prohibits all "downer" cattle from the human food supply — a move that is warranted to protect public health. However, the USDA violated its own policy when the Department directed inspectors not to test a downer cow in Texas in May 2004. The ban would be improved if it were extended to include other downer animals, such as deer, elk, pigs, sheep and bison.

5. Implementing a National Animal Identification and Tracking System

C

A national identification and tracking system is needed to speed recalls of tainted beef and to swiftly identify and locate herd mates of cattle found to have mad cow disease to prevent its spread. A tracking system would also enable the USDA to trace back pathogens, like deadly forms of E. coli, to identify and change practices on farms with conditions that foster these problems. USDA Secretary Veneman has talked about how a national animal identification system will be in place in the future, but has been slow to take action and has rejected inclusion of traceback for pathogens. On June 10, 2004, the USDA announced a series of public meetings to gather feedback on a national animal ID system and \$18 million for pilot projects. However, systems have been under evaluation for years suggesting that the hearings will only further delay implementation.

6. Increasing Surveillance for Brain-Wasting Disease in Humans and Requiring Mandatory Reporting of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

D

Tracking of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) which is sometimes caused by consumption of diseased beef is essential to determine the extent of mad cow disease and to detecting any new variants of the disease. The government has so far overlooked making improvements in tracking the disease in humans while it has focused on making policy reforms regarding cattle. The Centers for Disease Control did investigate a cluster of CJD cases in New Jersey, but only after intense pressure from Congress and citizens. Mandatory reporting of CJD would assist scientists in tracking the disease. The CJD Foundation has requested an \$800,000 increase in funding for the National Prion Disease Pathology Surveillance Center. Full funding for the Center would assist scientists in tracking the disease.

7. Establishing USDA Mandatory Recall Authority for Contaminated Meat

D

USDA Secretary Veneman was asked by the Senate Agriculture committee whether any additional statutory authority was needed and she replied, "no." This was a missed opportunity to ask for recall authority necessary to remove meat contaminated with mad

cow disease or other pathogens from the food supply. USDA also maintains a policy not to release names of stores that have received suspect meat, denying consumers important information. USDA did improve its rules meant to prevent potentially contaminated meat from entering the food supply when it established a "test-and-hold" requirement to keep suspected mad cows out of the food supply as long as test results were pending. A "test-and-hold" approach can prevent costly recalls.

8. Implementing Country Of Origin Labeling As Required by the 2002 Farm Bill

D

The Bush administration has lobbied for a two-year delay of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL). Labeling would provide information consumers need to have a choice about whether to buy beef from a country with mad cow disease in its herds. Administration support for full funding of COOL in the FY04 Appropriations bill would likely have led to implementation. USDA Secretary Ann Veneman said on June 2 that, "It is not something that the Administration supported."

9. Following Its Own Rules

F

The USDA broke its own rules meant to prevent mad cow disease and is under investigation for another possible infraction. The USDA's Inspector General is conducting a criminal investigation into claims by multiple witnesses that the USDA falsified its report saying the mad cow discovered in Washington State was a downer. It is not disputed that downers pose a high risk for mad cow disease and should be kept out of the food supply. However, if the Washington State cow was not a downer, this demonstrates that there are cattle other than downers that should be tested, as recommended by the USDA's own international advisory panel. In September 2003, the USDA banned imports of ground beef and other forms of processed beef from Canada in response to the Canadian discovery of mad cow disease in May 2003. Subsequently, a federal judge found that the department allowed millions of pounds of these products to be imported despite its own rule. In May 2004, USDA officials also directed inspectors in Texas not to test a downer cow in violation of the new USDA policy that all downer cattle must be tested.

10. Providing Opportunities for Public Input on Mad Cow Prevention

D

Although the USDA recently announced public listening sessions on the single issue of a national animal ID system, the department has not offered public hearings on the larger set of issues facing the American public despite repeated requests by public interest groups. This contrasts with the actions of the USDA under the leadership of Dan Glickman when the department held numerous public hearings in the 1990s after a deadly outbreak of E. coli.

Overall Grade

D