

Commentary: Thomas O. McGarity, Talk till cows come home, but beef safety takes action

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On Monday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that it had completed its investigation of the first case of mad cow disease detected in this country. Although it was unable to locate all of the relevant animals, USDA was confident that the missing cattle represented "little risk." This benign assessment is entirely consistent with USDA's confident assurances throughout the mad cow episode that consumers need not worry about the safety of U.S. beef.

A different message, however, is conveyed by the muted, but nevertheless powerful indictment of the government's approach to mad cow risks contained in last week's report of an international panel of experts assembled by USDA.

The message of the report of a subcommittee of the Secretary's Foreign Animal and Poultry Disease Advisory Committee is that the federal government's response was too little and too late. This conclusion represents a surprising reaffirmation of the complaints that public interest groups have been making for several years about the unwillingness of USDA and the Food and Drug Administration to take effective action to protect the American public from food-borne diseases.

The most damning finding is that USDA has identified only one mad cow in the United States, not because there was only one to find, but because USDA has not been looking very hard. Although the panel did not accuse USDA of adopting a "see no evil" approach to finding infected cows, it concluded that USDA's current efforts are grossly inadequate. Consequently, the existing surveillance program "must be significantly extended in order to measure the magnitude of the problem."

In other words, the Bush administration's comfortable assurance that the Washington mad cow was an isolated import from Canada is mostly hot air. The panel stated unequivocally that the "significance" of the Washington cow "cannot be dismissed by considering it 'an imported case.'"

Count two of the panel's indictment is a withering critique of the USDA's voluntary cattle identification program. The panel noted that the United States lacks "an effective animal traceability system," which explains why, once one mad cow had been identified, it was so difficult to locate the whereabouts of the animals born and raised with it.

The problem is no surprise to the USDA. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman acknowledged as much when she promised on Dec. 30 to "begin immediate implementation of a verifiable system of national animal identification." However, USDA has been working with the cattle industry for almost two years to come up with such a system, and it will probably be another two years before an effective system can be put into place -- assuming that the industry cooperates.

The third count of the panel's indictment criticizes the FDA's 1997 cattle feed regulations. The current prohibition of feeding protein from rendered cattle to cattle is, in the panel's view, "insufficient to prevent exposure of cattle" to the agent (a "prion") that causes mad cow disease. This sort of "partial" ban was tried in Europe, and it failed.

According to the experts, the only effective way to prevent the spread of mad cow disease through cattle feed is to prohibit the use of proteins from any mammals and poultry in cattle feed. If the economics of beef production demand that cattle become meat eaters, then let them eat fish. The feed ban that the panel suggests, however, is not on the Bush administration's agenda.

Finally, the panel concluded that cattle in the United States have likely been "indigenously infected" because of inadequate feeding restrictions. Here again, the panel's finding belies the administration's repeated pronouncements that the Washington mad cow was an isolated case, and it seriously undermines the administration's reckless assertion that mad cow disease does not pose a credible threat to consumers of meat produced in the United States.

At the very least, the panel's conclusions and recommendations will serve as a threshold for what other countries may reasonably expect by way of additional protective action before they agree to open their borders to U.S. meat imports. If the U.S. government is unwilling to implement the recommendations of its expert panel, why should other countries trust that government to ensure the safety of U.S. beef?

U.S. consumers might ask the same question.

It is time for the Bush administration to quit acting as a cheerleader for the American meat industry and to get serious about implementing an effective regulatory program that is stringent enough to warrant the trust of beef eaters throughout the world.

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