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Is Our Beef Safe?

This writer attended the annual meeting of the Indian River County Cattlemen's Association in December and our cattlemen were feeling great that the prices of cattle were finally coming up. It had been dismal for some time. Then later in December a single Holstein dairy cow in Washington state tested positive for BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, also known as Mad Cow Disease). Does this mean the cattle industry is doomed? Absolutely not! Our meat supply is safe to eat. The BSE agent has never been found in meat for human consumption anywhere, anytime.

The BSE agent has only been found in the central nervous system tissues - such as the spinal cord, brain, or the small intestine - of older cattle. When animals are slaughtered these tissues are removed from beef carcass before the animal is cut up. The majority of the animals in our beef supply (the source of fresh steaks and roasts we buy) are under 30 months of age and these young cattle are not susceptible to BSE. Meat from older cattle is usually ground into hamburger or used in canned meat products. Boneless steaks and roasts are considered to be the least at risk of all.

This cow in Washington state was about four and a half year old and had calving problems, had become nonambulatory so was slaughtered. The central nervous system tissue from this animal was removed and never entered the human food chain, it was sent for rendering for non-human food uses. Some of the tissue was sent for testing, this is how the BSE was discovered. None of the central nervous system tissue was in contact with the 10,210 pounds of raw beef that was shipped to six western states and later recalled as a precaution.

This cow had been purchased from Canada with 73 other head of cattle in 2001. They are trying to trace all the cattle from this herd, but all they have to use are the ear tags. The cow in question had a calf but they can't identify which one it was. Because they can't identify the calf all 450 head of cattle in the herd are going to be euthanized and no products from any of the slaughtered animals will enter the human food chain, nor will products be rendered.

The United States Department of Agriculture took swift steps to make sure that BSE did not get into our food supply. They are taking steps to make tracking of cattle easier and more accurate. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association is backing the USDA plan to expedite the implementation of a national animal identification system. They will probably use something like the micro-chips that can be placed under the skin of pets for positive identification.

Extensive records will have to be kept but it will be to everyone's advantage to have more than ear tags (which can come off) to identify our cattle. This improved identification and tracking system will also be beneficial if there should ever be terrorism attacks on our food supply. Testing for BSE here in the states will probably become more common than it has been, but will increase the costs of beef as the testing kit costs \$40 to \$50 per cow.

The cattlemen also back the USDA resolution to ban all downer animals from the food chain since the older cattle with other health problems are more susceptible to BSE. Our cattlemen want our food supply to be safe, they aren't willing to sacrifice the safety and reputation of the American Beef Industry for the income from a few sick head of cattle. Downer cattle will have to be euthanized according to animal welfare euthanasia guidelines and not enter the food supply.

Some of the other USDA actions include testing and holding all animals tested for BSE so they aren't slaughtered before the testing results are received, and the rules are broader for animals over 30 months of age. It also prohibits the use of air-injection stunning when cattle are slaughtered and mandates the removal of the small intestine (along with the spinal cord and brain) from all cattle and prohibits its use in the human food chain.

In Britain in 2000 BSE was contracted by animals who are fed the infected meat and bone meal of other animals and it spread to humans who ate meat from these cows. In humans the resulting disease is fatal. The use of animal parts in cattle feed in America has been banned since 1997. The only person in the US who has died from the human version of BSE had lived in Britain and came in contact with the meat there.

A lot was learned from the beef disaster in Britain and Europe in 2000. But here in the United States no meat infected with BSE entered our food supply and steps are being taken to make sure it doesn't happen, so there's no reason to stop enjoying beef. For those who are still want to be extra cautious and are afraid of ground beef, they can buy boneless cuts of beef and grind their own hamburger. Just keep in mind, no meat with BSE has been allowed into the food chain here in the United States and the USDA and our cattlemen are taking every step they can to make sure it never happens.

Our cattle provide much more than meat. Nearly every phase of our life involves products that came from cattle. No part goes to waste. The by-products include medicines, materials for cosmetics, adhesives, fatty acids for products like chewing gum, building supplies, leather, insecticides, home care products, and automobile brake fluid, just to name a few.