

Australia announces new measures for imported beef products

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On 18 July 2001, the Australian Government announced a new requirement that all beef and beef products imported into Australia should certify their bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) free status. This policy announcement follows on from, and effectively implements, the new food standard recently agreed by the Australian New Zealand Food Standards Council that requires all beef products sold for human consumption in Australia be derived from BSE-free animals.

The new certification regime has been developed from a detailed assessment of the risks posed to Australia from imported beef.

Australia has been monitoring the growing epidemic of BSE in Europe. In the last 12 months Germany, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Slovakia have all notified their first cases of indigenous BSE. Japan is the first non-European country with proven BSE.¹ A little more than 12 months ago these countries were declaring that their herds were free of BSE. The implementation of new testing requirements by the European Commission has resulted in a growing recognition that BSE is a far more widespread problem than initially acknowledged.

Attention has also turned to the widespread export of potentially infective meat and bone meal (MBM) from the United Kingdom and other European countries. As a result of these exports, it appears that the threat of BSE is now potentially global — which has certainly been borne out with the report of BSE in Japan.

Whilst the exact tonnage exported is not available, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has estimated that in excess of 170,000 tonnes of MBM was exported from the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe world-wide from 1990-1996. It is likely that many of the countries importing MBM over this period may not have had effective BSE controls and surveillance programs in place. Consequently, due to the external challenge from possibly BSE-infected MBM, BSE may have been amplified in cattle herds within some of these countries to varying extents and to date escaped detection.

In order to assess the different range of risk exposures, countries wishing to export beef and beef products to

Australia will need to apply to the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) and supply information on their exposure to different BSE risk factors and the range of control measures that have been in place to prevent the amplification of BSE within that country. Countries will be assessed by ANZFA and placed into one of the following categories:

Category A (certification required) — beef and beef products from these countries are regarded as posing a negligible risk to human health.

Category B (certification required) — these countries, while not reporting cases of BSE, may have been exposed to high risk factors, such as the importation of high-risk meat and bone meal.

Category C (certification required) — countries in this category are known to have considerable exposure to BSE risk materials, but have not reported indigenous cases of BSE.

Category D — These countries have reported cases of indigenous BSE in their herds. Beef and beef products from countries in this category pose the highest level of risk and will be refused entry to Australia.

This policy will be monitored to ensure it reflects any changes in the science on BSE. For example, should a validated test become available for the detection of specified risk material in beef end products, such a test may be adopted and incorporated into Australia's risk management protocols.

Additional details on the certification measures and the assessment process can be obtained from the following websites: <http://www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/bse/response.htm> and <http://www.anzfa.gov.au/mediareleases/publications/mediareleases/mediareleases2001/australia/announcesnewmeasurestoprotectpublicfromeffectsofbse/index.cfm>.

Reference

1. Inoue T. The Mainichi Daily News, Japan. ProMED 22 September 2001.