

**For information on
9 November 2004**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**Restriction on Importation of Beef from Countries Infected with
Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the updated situation on the temporary ban of import of beef from countries which have reported case of cattle with the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) (also known as “mad-cow disease”).

Background

BSE and the causative agent

2. BSE is a fatal, neurodegenerative, transmissible brain disease of cattle. The disease is classified as a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE). The main clinical signs include fear, depression, hyper-reflexia, tremor, ataxia and hypermetria. The average incubation period for the disease in cattle is about 4 to 5 years, though two cases of cattle of 21 to 23 months were found to have BSE in Japan in late 2003. Another example of the TSE family of disease known as scrapie is found in sheep and goats.

3. Epidemiological studies have suggested that the most important cause of the spread of BSE among ruminants (animals that chew the cud such as cattle, sheep and goats) is related to the consumption of animal feed containing ruminant-derived meat and bone meal¹ contaminated with TSE agent.

¹ Meat and bone meal have long been used as a source of protein in feed prepared for livestock and poultry throughout the world. However, since the occurrence of BSE, there have been grave concerns over the use of meat and bone meal to feed cattle, sheep and goats. The European Commission has imposed a ban on the feeding of mammalian meat and bone meal to cattle, sheep and goats since July 1994.

Human Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD)

4. Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) is a human disease characterized by progressive neurological and psychiatric symptoms and is so called because of its similarities in clinical symptoms as compared to the traditional form of CJD. The first vCJD case was reported in March 1996. Epidemiological evidence has suggested that vCJD is strongly associated with exposure to the BSE agent. The most likely mode is ingestion of food contaminated by affected bovine central nervous system tissue.

Existing Import Requirement

5. Hong Kong's import control against BSE is derived from international guidelines. According to international authorities including World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the BSE agent should be prevented from entering the human food chain. Under the Imported Game, Meat and Poultry Regulations of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132), it is specified that each consignment of imported beef must be accompanied by an official health certificate stating that the meat is fit for human consumption. Special health attestation is required by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) for countries with BSE, taking reference from guidelines recommended by WHO and OIE.

6. OIE also provides recommended specific guidelines on health assurance for imported beef and beef products on different BSE status of a country. Criteria to be considered on the BSE status include risk assessment for identifying all potential factors for BSE occurrence (e.g. consumption of meat-and-bone meal in cattle), BSE surveillance and monitoring system, reporting and investigation of suspected cattle, and awareness of BSE for farmers and veterinarians. High risk parts which are defined as Specified Risk Materials (SRM) of cattle in countries affected by BSE, e.g. brain, eyes, tonsils, spinal cord and intestine, etc. should be prevented from human consumption. FEHD will consider the BSE status of the import country with reference to OIE guidelines and impose appropriate health requirements on the beef and beef products from these countries to ensure public health.

Suspension of Importation of beef

7. In March 1996, importation of beef from the United Kingdom (UK) was suspended pursuant to the first report of Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in the UK and its possible relationship with BSE in cattle. The UK and the European Commission subsequently implemented a series of control measures in line with the OIE guidelines to prevent and control BSE in their cattle and to ensure the safety of beef. As a result, the import suspension was lifted in September 1999. Hong Kong later suspended the importation of beef from Japan, Canada and the United States (US) in September 2001, May 2003 and December 2003 respectively due to the report of BSE cases in these countries. Apart from Hong Kong, beef from these countries was also banned by many other places, including Australia, the Mainland, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, etc.

Latest Position

8. The HKSAR Government has been in close contact with the relevant authorities of Canada, the US and Japan to discuss the progress of implementation of the BSE management programme in their countries. The Canadian Government has implemented a number of improvement measures including regulatory control of proper removal of SRM in beef and beef products destined for consumption. FEHD officers visited Canada in October 2004 to conduct on-site inspection of the slaughtering plants supplying beef to Hong Kong and to observe the actual operation of these slaughterhouses.

9. FEHD has also been corresponding with the US authorities including meeting with them to discuss the latest BSE situation and the progress of implementation of measures under the BSE management programme in the US. The Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food also met with a US official delegation led by the Under Secretary of Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services of the US Department of Agriculture in later October 2004 to reiterate the principles and requirements of our importation regime in relation to the US beef. As for Japan, the Japanese authority was in close contact with FEHD in 2001 after the first case of BSE. However, there had been no further detailed information regarding BSE situation since end 2001 until June this year. After receiving the latest information from the Japanese authority, FEHD has sought further clarification on the situation and is still waiting for the reply.

10. In response to the trade's concern on the progress of resuming the importation of beef from these countries, officers of the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau and FEHD have regularly briefed the trade representatives to keep them abreast of the latest positions.

Way Forward

11. Hong Kong applies the same health requirements according to international guidelines on the import of beef from all countries. The Administration will lift the temporary ban on the importation of beef and beef products from countries with reported case of BSE provided that all our import requirements, including the implementation of a satisfactory BSE management programme, which are based on OIE guidelines, in respect of export of beef can be fully met.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department
November 2004