

Secretary Ann M. Veneman
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Room 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Veneman,

I am writing to express my concern about the USDA's role in preventing the occurrence and spread of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, in the United States. As you surely know, the disease can be transferred to humans through the consumption of infected meat products. The occurrence of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), the human form of BSE, is of serious concern to me, as this disease is always fatal.

I recently became aware that the USDA tested only 20,543 of the approximately 35 million cattle that went to slaughter last year for BSE. Your current proposal is to test 268,000 cattle per year. While this is an improvement, I cannot trust that this sample is enough to catch all of the cases of BSE in the United States. Other industrialized nations like Japan test all of their cattle – why does the USDA refuse to implement a similar policy? Consumer confidence in the ability of the USDA to appropriately monitor this disease will only continue to drop if testing policies are not changed to include mandatory tests on all cattle sent to slaughter. Moreover, the borders of more than 50 countries will remain closed to U.S. beef exports until a stronger policy is enacted.

While I feel it is important to have mandatory government testing of all cattle sent to slaughter, until such a policy is enacted, allowing farmers to test their own cattle will increase consumer confidence in the safety of the beef supply. It is time that the government gives up its monopoly on BSE tests and allows farmers to independently test and label their products as BSE-free.

The Food and Drug Administration in 1997 and in January of this year banned all ruminant proteins from cattle feed in an effort to prevent the spread of BSE. These steps were important, but not enough. Under current regulations and practice, non-ruminant feed can be supplemented with rendered diseased cattle. In turn, these animals are often rendered and added to cattle feed. Because TSEs, the greater family of spongiform encephalopathies to which BSE belongs, are known to spread between species, this feeding practice is dangerous. In addition, BSE has an incubation period of up to eight years in cattle, meaning the spread of the disease can go unnoticed for years. Until all loopholes are closed that would allow ruminant proteins in feed, only thorough testing of all slaughtered cattle will prevent more cases of mad cow disease.

I firmly believe the safety of our food supply needs to be guaranteed for the prevention of vCJD, a disease with no cure, treatment, or vaccine, and for the economic security of our nation's farmers. I urge you to take immediate action to see that all cattle in the US are tested for BSE, and to allow US producers the ability to affirm their own herd's health.

Sincerely,