

Mad Cow Case Renews Debate Over Food Safety

Dori Meinert - Copley News Service

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Nearly two years ago, a congressional study determined that the federal government wasn't doing enough to keep mad cow disease out of the United States.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., among the senators requesting that study, proposed legislation to tighten government regulations and improve the safety of domestic and imported meat products. But he met with little success.

Now that the first case of the disease has been discovered in the United States, Durbin suspects the political climate will be different.

"There's a built-in resistance by industry groups to change, particularly in the area of consumer safety," said Durbin. "I've been talking about this for a while. Unfortunately, one cow in Washington has been our best argument so far."

When Congress reconvenes in January, Durbin said he plans to introduce a bill that would strengthen livestock feed standards, expand the surveillance of suspicious outbreaks of neurological disorders in livestock and tighten labeling requirements to clarify what can and can't be fed to livestock. Durbin also proposes to require more detailed information on the type and origin of meat in imported products.

In February of 2002, the General Accounting Office concluded that "federal actions do not sufficiently ensure" against infected animals and products entering the country and spreading to the human food supply. In particular, the GAO warned of weaknesses in import controls and lax enforcement of a ban of animal feed containing animal byproducts, considered a likely source of mad cow disease.

Officials with the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates animal feed, said enforcement has improved and 99 percent of the nation's feed companies now comply with the ban. But Durbin and others believe the agency hasn't done enough.

The agency relies only on inspection of company records - not independent tests of the feed itself, according to Stephen Sundlof, director of the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine, in an interview with the Associated Press.

Since 1997, the United States has banned the feeding of animal byproducts to cattle, sheep and goats. The disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is believed to be spread through brain and spinal cord matter.

On Monday, Agriculture Department officials said the Holstein infected with mad cow disease in Washington state was born four months before the United States and Canada began banning the use of animal byproducts. The animal was born in Canada in April 1997.

The incident is prompting renewed calls for legislation to ban the sale of meat from downed animals - those too sick or injured to walk - for human consumption.

The Senate in July passed by voice vote an amendment by Sen. Daniel K. Akaka, D-Hawaii, to an agriculture appropriations bill that would have barred funding for the inspection process by which such meat is approved for sale. But the House defeated a similar amendment by Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y., in a 202-199 vote.

Illinois lawmakers voting for the ban were: Reps. Judy Biggert, R-Hinsdale; Rahm Emanuel, D-Chicago; Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Chicago; Mark Kirk, R-Wilmette; Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Evanston; and Jerry Weller, R-Morris.

Voting against the ban were: Reps. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville; Philip Crane, R-Wauconda; Lane Evans, D-Rock Island; Henry Hyde, R-Wood Dale; Tim Johnson, R-Urbana; Donald Manzullo, R-Egan; and John Shimkus, R-Collinsville.

Not voting were: Reps. Danny Davis, D-Chicago; Luis Gutierrez, D-Chicago; Ray LaHood, R-Peoria; William Lipinski, D-Chicago; and Bobby Rush, D-Chicago. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Yorkville, seldom votes, which is tradition for speakers.

Illinois Beef Association President Curt Rincker said he supports the testing of all downed animals for mad cow disease and the meat held back from the marketplace until the results are known.

"Food safety is the most critical of all of our issues. We're talking about a very low percentage of our cows that go to slaughter that are non-ambulatory. This will be a minimal cost with great benefits," said Rincker of Shelbyville.

The first case of mad cow disease in this country has caused "quite a bit of concern" among Illinois' 17,000 beef producers, who send about 400,000 head of cattle to slaughterhouse each year, he said. Like beef producers nationwide, Illinois producers had seen a 10 percent increase in beef sales in the past 10 years after decades of stagnant sales, Rincker said.

After the initial crisis response, the federal government will be forced to look at the long-term

issues, said Durbin, a longtime critic of the fragmented nature of U.S. food safety programs.

"Once they start asking that, it's going to lead most people to where I've been for 10 years or more - arguing that the food safety agencies in the federal government are a bureaucratic nightmare," Durbin said. "That hasn't changed."