



**Testimony of James H. Hodges, President
American Meat Institute Foundation
Before the
Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee's
Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs, Foreign Commerce and Tourism**

April 4, 2001

Good morning, Chairman Fitzgerald and members of this subcommittee. I represent the American Meat Institute, the nation's oldest and largest meatpacking and processing industry association. Our members slaughter and process 70 percent of the Nation's beef, pork, lamb, veal and turkey products. Most of our members are small, family-owned businesses with a single manufacturing plant. However, we also represent some of the largest meat companies in the world.

I speak to you today as a meat scientist with 30 years of experience in the meatpacking and supermarket industries, as well as USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. Never in my career have I seen so much public anguish over an animal disease as I've seen in the last six months over BSE. Given our Nation's phenomenal history of animal disease eradication - we are world leaders in this regard - it is perplexing and disappointing to see attention being focused on what we are doing wrong instead of what we are doing right.

I have three messages to leave with you today. First, we do not have BSE in this country. Second, we have taken prudent steps to prevent BSE from entering this country. And third, if, heaven forbid, BSE were ever to find its way into this country, we can diagnose it, isolate it, contain it and prevent it from reaching consumers in a swift and decisive way. Our risk of BSE in domestic cattle is not zero, nor can it ever be, be we are a long way from a BSE crisis in the U.S.

Let me focus for a moment on my first message: We do not have BSE in this country. That fact bears repeating because it's been lost lately in some hysterical and speculative news reporting.

The BSE crisis in Europe has been a frightening situation to watch. It was tragic when it first impacted British cattle. And it was horrific when science began to support a relationship between eating products contaminated with the infective agent and the development of a human illness by young people in Britain.

The British problem - now shared by 12 other European nations - has provided strong incentive for the U.S. government and U.S. beef industry to take aggressive actions to prevent this devastating animal disease in U.S. herds. In fact, we took action so early that some people now seem to question why we aren't announcing major new efforts today. The answer: we took swift, science-based actions early on that have protected our livestock and given us the coveted distinction of being a BSE-free nation.

The U.S. approach to BSE prevention can best be described as a "triple firewall" strategy. Because BSE is not present in U.S. herds, the first critical firewall in protecting U.S. cattle involves protecting U.S. borders. As early as 1989, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) banned the importation of cattle and most beef products from countries with BSE.

The second critical firewall involves careful surveillance. Veterinarians are present at every U.S. meat packing plant and check cattle for signs of any disease - including BSE. No animal can be processed for meat without inspection. Additionally, USDA routinely conducts laboratory tests for BSE. For a country in which BSE is not endemic - has never been detected in the native cattle population - the U.S. has one of the most statistically sound and comprehensive surveillance programs in the world. Of the roughly 12,000 animals tested for BSE by the U.S. government, none have been positive.

The third critical firewall involves controlling what cattle are fed. Evidence indicates that BSE may have been spread in the U.K. and Europe by contaminated feed. Even though the U.S. has no BSE in cattle, the feeding of any protein derived from ruminant animals to cattle is prohibited in this country. In fact, there is a growing trend within the beef industry to require certification from producers that cattle have met all requirements with respect to complying with FDA regulations. AMI has provided its members with model certification language and we understand it is beginning to be widely used.

Taken together, these efforts provide the best reasonable assurance that U.S. cattle will remain BSE-free and that U.S. consumers will not be exposed to any related health risks. That is not to say we should rest on our laurels. We must continually evaluate and improve our preventative control measures, if warranted, and we must assure our regulatory agencies are provided the necessary resources to do their job.

It is important to remember that BSE has been diagnosed only in European livestock. The U.S. is a long way from Europe. Our livestock populations are very different, as are many of our rendering, feeding and production practices. In addition, Europe is in the midst of a crisis and crises warrant strong and dramatic actions. In contrast, we do not have a crisis in the U.S. It is critical that our BSE prevention policies reflect this fact. While our media have begun to mirror British tabloid coverage of BSE, our cattle herds are, and will remain, very different from those in the U.K. and Europe. Our policies must reflect these differences and be supported by the best available science lest we head down the slippery slope of creating our own hysteria.