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BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOREIGN
COMMERCE, AND TOURISM
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and my Agency, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), on the activities that USDA conducts to prevent the introduction of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) into the United States.

BSE, widely referred to as “mad cow disease,” is a chronic degenerative disease affecting the central nervous system of cattle. The disease was first diagnosed in 1986 in Great Britain. As you know, BSE has had a substantial impact on the livestock industry in the United Kingdom. The disease also has been confirmed in native-born cattle in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland. APHIS is enforcing import restrictions and is conducting surveillance for BSE to ensure that this serious disease does not become established in the United States.

BSE is classified as a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE). The agent responsible for BSE and other TSEs has not been completely characterized. Other TSEs include scrapie (which

affects sheep and goats), transmissible mink encephalopathy, feline spongiform encephalopathy, and chronic wasting disease of deer and elk. In humans, TSEs include kuru, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), Gerstmann-Straussler-Scheinker syndrome, fatal familial insomnia, and variant CJD, which has been linked to BSE.

In cooperation with USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), APHIS has taken comprehensive and stringent measures for prevention, education, surveillance, and response. To prevent BSE from entering the country, APHIS has prohibited the importation of live ruminants from countries where BSE is known to exist in native cattle since 1989. Other products derived from ruminants, such as fetal bovine serum, bonemeal, meat-and-bone meal, bloodmeal, offal, fats, and glands, are also prohibited from entry, except under special conditions or under USDA permit for scientific or research purposes.

On December 12, 1997, APHIS extended these restrictions to include all of the countries in Europe due to concerns about widespread risk factors and inadequate surveillance for BSE.

As of December 7, 2000, USDA prohibited all imports of rendered animal protein products, regardless of species, from Europe. This decision followed the determination by the European Union that feed of nonruminant origin was potentially cross-contaminated with the BSE agent. The restriction applies to products originating, rendered, processed or otherwise associated with European products. USDA took this emergency action to prevent potentially cross-contaminated products from entering the United States. The same type of rendered product from ruminant origin has been prohibited from BSE-infected countries since 1989.

USDA also works very closely with other Federal agencies involved in the prevention of BSE introduction. For example, for the past 5 years, USDA agencies – APHIS, FSIS, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and the Cooperative State Research Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) - have worked closely with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, and Food and Drug Administration on technical issues regarding TSEs. In addition, APHIS officials work with representatives from these other Federal agencies and our Canadian and Mexican counterparts on the Tripartite TSE Working Group.

As part of USDA's surveillance program for BSE in the United States, pathologists at APHIS' National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) in Ames, Iowa, histopathologically examine the brains of these suspect animals for signs of BSE. Specifically, samples are tested using a technique called immunohistochemistry, which tests for the presence of the protease-resistant prion protein, an indication marker for BSE. NVSL also examines samples from neurologically ill cattle and nonambulatory (downer) cattle identified on the farm or at slaughter and from cattle submitted to veterinary diagnostic laboratories and teaching hospitals that tested negative for rabies.

In addition, veterinary field pathologists and field investigators from APHIS and FSIS have received training from their British counterparts in diagnosing BSE. FSIS officials inspect cattle before they go to slaughter; the inspection procedures include identifying animals with central nervous system conditions. Animals with such conditions are considered suspect for BSE, prohibited from slaughter, and referred

to APHIS for examination. As of February 28, 2001, the brains from 12,212 animals in the United States and Puerto Rico had been examined with no evidence of BSE or other TSEs detected.

APHIS also monitors the remaining cattle imported from Great Britain, Belgium, and other European countries before the bans on imports from those countries went into effect. As of December 31, 2000, of the 496 cattle imported from Great Britain and Ireland between 1981 and 1989, four animals were still alive. The animals are quarantined and observed regularly. APHIS continues to attempt to purchase the four live animals for diagnostic research purposes. The 24 European cattle imported in 1996-97 that are still alive are currently under quarantine, and APHIS is attempting to buy these animals as well.

There were also two flocks of sheep imported from Belgium and the Netherlands in 1996 that were under State quarantine in Vermont since October 1998 due to probable TSE exposure. Four sheep from one of the flocks have tested positive for an atypical TSE of foreign origin. There is no simple test to determine whether the sheep are infected with BSE or another TSE, such as a European strain of scrapie—a TSE that affects sheep and goats. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the animals were exposed to feed contaminated with the agent that causes BSE before they left Europe.

The owner of an additional flock that contained female progeny from these imported sheep sold his entire herd to USDA in July 2000. On July 21, 2000, then Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman issued a Declaration of Extraordinary Emergency authorizing the seizure of the two imported flocks. However, the owners of these flocks contested the decision and sought to have the seizure blocked through the legal system. On February 6, 2001, the U.S. District Court for the District of Vermont

ruled that the owners of the flocks must comply with the Declaration of Extraordinary Emergency and surrender the sheep to USDA. The owners subsequently filed an appeal with the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals in which the original decision was upheld. USDA took the first flock on March 21, 2001, and the second flock on March 23, 2001. The sheep have been euthanized, samples for further diagnostic tests were taken, and the carcasses were disposed of in a safe manner.

APHIS, in cooperation with FSIS, has also drafted an emergency response plan to be used in the event that BSE is identified in United States. The plan details comprehensive instructions for USDA staff as to who is to do what, when, where, and how in the case of such an emergency. USDA, HHS, and other federal and state partners are now integrating this plan into a government-wide plan, including actions to be taken by FDA and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

In 1998, USDA entered into a cooperative agreement with Harvard University's School of Public Health to analyze and evaluate the Department's measures to prevent an introduction of BSE. The Harvard study, which is expected to be completed in the next few months, reviews current scientific information, assesses the pathways that BSE could potentially enter the United States, and identifies any additional measures that could be taken to protect human and animal health.

APHIS' TSE Working Group monitors and assesses all ongoing events and research findings regarding TSEs. APHIS continually revises and adjusts prevention and diagnostic measures as it receives new information and knowledge.

As an additional preventative measure, APHIS supports the FDA regulation (effective August 4, 1997) prohibiting the use of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feeds given to

ruminants. The final regulation also requires process and control systems to ensure that ruminant feed does not contain the prohibited mammalian tissues.

While BSE has never been diagnosed in the United States, other TSEs do occur in this country. For example, scrapie has been reported in the United States primarily in the Suffolk breed. It is important to note that there is no scientific evidence to indicate that scrapie poses a risk to human health or can be transmitted to humans.

In 1952, the Secretary of Agriculture declared a state of emergency in an attempt to eradicate scrapie in the United States. Although that goal has not yet been achieved, USDA continues to identify the disease and attempt to eradicate it through the Scrapie Flock Certification Program that was implemented on October 1, 1992.

This voluntary program is a cooperative effort among producers, allied industry representatives, accredited veterinarians, State animal health officials, and APHIS officials. The program provides participating producers with the opportunity to protect their sheep from scrapie and enhance the marketability of their animals through certifying their origin in scrapie-free flocks. In addition, APHIS regulations restrict the interstate movement of sheep from scrapie-infected and source flocks.

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a TSE of deer and elk that has occurred only in limited areas in the Western United States. First recognized as a clinical syndrome in 1967, it is typified by chronic weight loss leading to death. To date, there is no known relationship between CWD and any

other naturally occurring spongiform encephalopathy of animals or people. Further research continues in this area.

Surveillance for CWD in Colorado and Wyoming has been ongoing since 1983 and, to date, has confirmed the limits of the endemic areas in those States. An extensive nationwide surveillance effort was started in 1997-98 to better define the geographic distribution of CWD. This ongoing surveillance effort is a two-pronged approach consisting of hunter-harvest cervid surveys conducted in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming, as well as surveillance throughout the entire country targeting deer and elk exhibiting clinical signs suggestive of CWD.

As in the past, APHIS remains committed to preventing the introduction, establishment, and spread of foreign animal diseases such as BSE. APHIS, in cooperation with FDA and other agencies, is enforcing stringent import restrictions and is conducting a comprehensive surveillance program to ensure that BSE does not become established in the United States. USDA will continue to take every action possible, including prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery measures, to safeguard domestic livestock and the U.S. food supply from this serious disease. Again, I would like to thank the Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee for granting me this opportunity to explain APHIS' key role in addressing issues involving BSE.

