



## **Joint WHO/FAO/OIE Technical Consultation on BSE, Public Health and Trade**

### **Background**

On 21 December 2000, WHO organized a joint informal meeting of World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) with twelve consultants and with the participation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the European Commission (EC). The meeting discussed two issues which were clearly emerging for the public regarding Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) safety – ‘what is safe to eat?’ and ‘is enough being done to protect human populations from exposure to BSE?’ The goal of the meeting was to determine if there was sufficient new science for a formal consultation, with a view toward providing updated information to assist our member countries and the public, particularly in non-EU countries.

The meeting participants concluded that while there are no new breakthroughs in science, there is a much higher level of awareness of the issues and high levels of concern from the public, and that these forces are driving country needs for evidence-based, independent information and advice to create good policy.

### Several specific problems were identified:

- Major studies on the distribution of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) infectivity in various tissues are under way, and although results have been continuously published in the literature, there is a need for review and clearer communication to the public. We would need to review this evidence to decide if there was need to alter the current WHO table on the distribution of infectivity. There is also a need to review abattoir and slaughter practices in more detail, particularly international practices, as this determines the potential for cross contamination of different parts of the carcass.

- New testing programs for BSE have proven valuable in supplementing surveillance systems for BSE. Strong concerns were expressed about the pros and cons of mass testing – particularly whether testing will lead to safer food.
- There are a number of mathematical projections about the future of the variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) and BSE epidemics, with broad estimates. Some are alarming. It was felt there was a need for a critical review of these studies and clearer communication of their meaning.
- Managing risk from BSE and vCJD is problematic with a number of issues including actual national/regional variation in risk levels and national/regional variation in policies.
- There is a need to look more closely at the implications of global trade – how food is exchanged across borders, how animal feed based on meat-and-bone meal (MBM) moves around the world, how rendered materials are used and moved around the world, how meat preparations containing risk materials and how live animals are sold around the world, and to consider the potential impacts on countries without BSE cases or vCJD cases and without surveillance capacity. As the principle route for transmission of BSE is contaminated animal feed, this subject requires close scrutiny.
- A number of ‘risk assessments’ have been conducted, but some countries cannot quickly find the core information they need to determine if they are at risk of BSE, or if they are importing foods with a risk of causing vCJD.
- Getting updated information on the potential presence of BSE in sheep, and about BSE exposure to other animal species is also necessary. Although there are, as yet, no cases of BSE identified in native flocks, the issue is critically important at the global level.
- Risk communication was specifically identified as a problem area.

A Joint Technical Consultation is warranted to pull this information together. We will work towards clear and workable recommendations for countries, particularly developing countries, to:

- protect their human populations from vCJD
- protect their livestock populations from BSE, and
- protect their industries from trade restrictions and their repercussions

### **Goals of a Joint Technical Consultation**

The principle goal of the consultation will be to provide better information to countries (especially those that don't have experience with BSE and vCJD) that require information to help them make their own risk assessment and determine if they may have already introduced or at risk of introducing the BSE agent. Those countries that do not have BSE in their native cattle populations require information to help them identify risks for BSE in other countries, notably those that, knowingly or unknowingly, could lead to the undesired importation of either BSE or vCJD risks. In addition, it is important from the international perspective that countries are prevented from exporting materials which they do not consume within their own boundaries and that could either seed BSE, or could cause vCJD. To this end, the conditions which should result in the prevention of exports from a country will also be reviewed.

A secondary goal is to provide a forum for the review of some of the most compelling problems in BSE control internationally. The Joint Technical Consultation will discuss and synthesize current knowledge on pathogenesis, epidemiology, distribution, likely course of the epidemics, prevention and control of BSE/vCJD.

The key policy and communications issues are as follows:

1. Reducing the risk for BSE and vCJD – extensive international experience has accrued regarding the most significant activities to reduce the risk of BSE or vCJD; policies to minimize human exposure to BSE have been introduced (and evaluated) in many countries.
2. Global risk and global need for action - there is a global risk of BSE due to trade in live animals and certain bovine-tissue containing products; the global risk assessment will include information about global trade practices with the aim of highlighting potential high risk activities.
3. Risk assessment for vCJD and BSE –It is essential that countries should not wait until their first case of vCJD or BSE before acting; there are some hypothesized risks in trade in meat and meat products, live animals and animal feed; countries without known BSE cases must conduct risk assessments and may require surveillance systems for BSE and vCJD.
4. Communication of Risk – one of the largest problems has been the difficulties in communicating risks in the face of incomplete knowledge; the process of

development of public policy through iterative processes has undermined public confidence.

### **Format**

The first two days will be spent in plenary presentations, with time periods for questions. The second day and a half will be spent alternating small working groups with joint sessions, ending with a joint session summarizing recommendations.

### Proposed working groups (DRAFT)

#### 1. Risk Assessment

- Define 'safe to eat' and/or 'not safe to eat'
- What are the essential questions to be answered by a country to decide if it is importing BSE/vCJD risk? What are the essential activities to undertake to avoid an internal BSE/vCJD risk? Include – feed practices, rendering practices, slaughter practices etc.

#### 2. Risk Management – International

- Spreading of BSE internationally<sup>1</sup> – how can this be prevented? Includes discussions of international trade in bovines, animal feed, specified risk materials<sup>2</sup> (SRM), meat and bone meal (MBM); consideration of export restrictions, animal feed bans, mechanically recovered meat (MRM) bans; considerations of prevalence of BSE in country if relevant

#### 3. Risk Management - National

- Controlling BSE nationally – Methods of surveillance and cost implications, herd cull vs. cohort cull, etc.
- Condemned materials – MBM storage, alternative uses, environmental contamination; balancing risks
- Testing for BSE – Safety or Surveillance?

#### 4. Risk of BSE in sheep and other animal species; scenarios

#### 5. Risk communication – what are the key messages? Include discussion of epidemic projections; what are the consumer requirements and how do we fill the requirements for information from consumers?

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<sup>1</sup> The OIE International Animal Health Code will be provided as a background document for this working group

<sup>2</sup> Specified Risk Materials is the expression used in this document to indicate those tissues of bovine (and possibly other animals) known to contain BSE infectivity and which are not safe for consumption by humans and some (possibly all) animal species. Similar expressions, such as specified bovine offals, have similar purposes but may be defined differently.

**Venue**

OIE Headquarters

Paris, France

**Date**

June 11-14, 2001

**Participation**

By invitation only;

- Subject area specialists
- NGOs and representatives of stakeholder organizations - e.g. renderers associations, consumers associations, other International Organizations
- Representatives of regions and countries, including participants from developing countries
- National Public Health, Food and Animal Health authorities

**Information Dissemination (Draft)**Before

Web site postings, background papers and information package, press communications.

After

Press conference; Technical report including the presentations