



# Consumer Focus

► by Meghan Richey

## Fourth time's the charm

*If there can be such a thing as a BSE success story, this was it. Science-based safeguards and a proactive industry communication plan preserved consumer confidence and markets.*

‘Mad cow, sane coverage’ declared a journalism industry watchdog group after the April 2012 announcement of the nation’s fourth positive case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). Most in the beef industry would say the *Columbia Journalism Review* was correct. The media coverage largely was sane compared to the foreign and domestic panic that ensued from the United State’s first BSE case in 2003 — “the cow that stole Christmas.”

“Mainstream media calmly reported the situation and stressed the fact that the infected cow never got near our nation’s food supply,” agreed analysts with the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). “Cash and futures cattle markets recovered their initial knee-jerk losses very quickly, and producers were not overly affected unless they had the unfortunate timing of marketing on Tuesday afternoon. But, the aftermath of the situation actually turned out to be encouraging, that media outlets could report the first case since early 2006 with cool heads and equitable facts.”

What was different this time? For starters, we’ve been down this road already and learned some costly lessons. Consumer

familiarity was certainly on our side, and the existing interlocking systems to prevent and detect the disease demonstrated they work. But it was the industry’s proactive communication plan that earned the most credit for preserving consumer confidence and markets.

Funded by the beef checkoff and executed by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), industry spokespeople leaped into action with a plan for messages and dissemination already in place. Websites had already been created. Social media accounts were already established. Scientific experts were already lined up. Talking points were already written and rehearsed. Allied partners were already identified.

Industry “simply” followed the crisis management plan it had previously crafted. For its forward planning, industry was rewarded with mostly balanced and factual media coverage, which repeated three key messages:

1. The cow was never presented for slaughter for human consumption, so at no time presented a risk to the food supply or human health.
2. The existing surveillance system worked

to detect the disease even at very low levels in the U.S. cattle population.

3. It was the “atypical” type of BSE, meaning it was likely not caused by contaminated feed that leads to “classical” BSE. Instead it was likely a random genetic mutation.

### Social media delivers

Social media is the increasingly preferred method for consumers to communicate and share information. And they aren’t just looking to visit with each other online; they’re increasingly turning to social media as their preferred source of news. In fact, among those who get news online, 75% get news forwarded through email or posts on social networking sites, and 52% share links to news with others via those means.

We aren’t just talking about a few young, progressive hipsters using social media. It’s gone mainstream in a big way. After only eight years of existence, Facebook reported 901 million active users in March 2012 and is projected to surpass 1 billion active users by this fall. That means roughly one in seven people on Earth are active Facebook users, logging in at least monthly. Twitter is also gaining sizable participation, and in June 2012 began exceeding 400 million tweets per day.

To reach consumers, industry capitalized on the instantaneous mass communication



ATYPICAL BSE FOUND IN U.S. — NO

### Critics question adequacy of surveillance levels

Though the overwhelming response from media, domestic consumers and foreign trading partners indicated confidence in the safety of U.S. beef due to existing disease-prevention and -detection safeguards, some consumer groups were not so satisfied.

“We continue to call for more testing to determine if any classical BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) exists within our borders and to adequately monitor the progression of the disease after the two atypical BSE cases were discovered in 2005 and 2006,” said Max Thornsberry, chairman of R-CALF USA’s animal health committee.

Likewise, Consumers Union senior scientist Michael Hansen said, “It is surprising that the existing small testing program even

detected this case, if in fact the incidence of mad cow in the U.S. is very low.”

Hansen specifically urged USDA to “increase its currently very small surveillance program of 40,000 tests annually by a factor of at least 10, for several years.”

Hansen’s “very small” label on U.S. surveillance rates is hotly contested. In fact, the United States’ testing is 10 times the level required by the OIE and targets the higher-risk segments of the domestic cattle herd.

“The finding of this BSE-positive cow is not particularly surprising, and it is certainly no cause for alarm,” said Ron DeHaven, CEO of

afforded by social media platforms, which didn't exist when the first domestic case of BSE was detected. Tweeting under the handle @BeltwayBeef, the NCBA Policy Division responded to the developing conversation on Twitter. Every tweet that mentioned BSE or the more common slang "mad cow" received this reply: "The animal was never processed and poses no threat to the food supply #BSEinfo." With reply tweets being sent so quickly and frequently, online consumers couldn't help but get the message that their food supply was safe.

Links were shared on Facebook, directing traffic to audio recordings of interviews with experts, blog posts at [www.beltwaybeef.com](http://www.beltwaybeef.com) and other blogs, and in-depth answers at [www.bseinfo.org](http://www.bseinfo.org). As social media is intended to facilitate, links were then re-shared by other industry spokespeople, beef producers, media outlets and everyday citizens.

"We worked to get and stay ahead of this issue," said NCBA CEO Forrest Roberts. "We're trying to manage this to the very, very best outcome."

### Standards reduce global BSE by 99%

"America's cattle producers' top priority is raising healthy cattle. As such, the U.S. beef community has collaborated with and worked with animal health experts and government to put in place multiple interlocking safeguards over the past two decades to prevent BSE from taking hold in the United States," said NCBA Cattle Health and Well-being Committee Chairman Tom Talbot. "This effort was recognized in May 2007 when the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the leading international body for animal health, formally classified the United States as a 'controlled risk' country for BSE.

"The 'controlled risk' classification recognizes that U.S. regulatory controls are

effective and that U.S. fresh beef and beef products from cattle of all ages are safe and can be safely traded due to our interlocking safeguards," he continued.

The United States has a longstanding system of three interlocking safeguards against BSE that protects public and animal health in the United States:

- ▶ Specified risk materials (SRMs), which can transmit BSE, have been removed from all cattle presented for slaughter since 2004.
- ▶ A strong ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban has been in place since 1997.
- ▶ An ongoing BSE surveillance program enables USDA to detect the disease if it exists at very low levels in the U.S. cattle population.

"Evidence shows that our systems and safeguards to prevent BSE are working, as are similar actions taken by countries around the world," said USDA chief veterinarian John Clifford. "In 2011, there were only 29 worldwide cases of BSE, a dramatic decline, and 99% reduction since the peak in 1992 of 37,311 cases."

### Atypical means no epidemic

The fourth-detected case of domestic BSE was atypical, not classical.

"If you look at the 60 cases [of atypical BSE] that have occurred around the world, they appear to have occurred quite randomly, and they are independent of a BSE epidemic, for instance in Europe, where they have sufficient number of cases to epidemiologically model an epidemic," said Guy Loneragan, epidemiologist and professor of food safety and public health at Texas Tech University. "The atypical cases occurred independent of that, which would indicate that it is distinct from a BSE epidemic."

Experts are unsure of the exact cause of atypical BSE, though.

**"Regardless of whether we completely understand this atypical strain of BSE, it's important to know that we have the controls needed to protect the human and animal populations against BSE."**

**— Guy Loneragan**

"It's important to note that BSE isn't contagious. It can't be passed from animal to animal or animal to person. [Classical BSE] is transmitted from contaminated feed," said Loneragan. "However, there is a possibility that [atypical BSE] is not from the feed; it's a spontaneous, sporadic event that might occur in older animals."

Bruce Akey, director of the New York State Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory at Cornell University, concurred, saying this case was "just a random mutation that can happen every once in a great while in an animal. Random mutations go on in nature all the time."

"Atypical BSE may just be a part of aging, and as long as we test, we should expect to see an occasional case," said Richard Raymond, former undersecretary of agriculture for food safety.

"Regardless of whether we completely understand this atypical strain of BSE, it's important to know that we have the controls needed to protect the human and animal populations against BSE," Loneragan added.

### Trading partners confident

Though it's been eight and a half years, the memories of losing foreign market

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# THREAT TO FOOD SUPPLY!

the American Veterinary Medical Association. "It is not surprising because we have known for several years that there is a very low prevalence of BSE in our nation's cattle population. USDA has maintained a good, targeted surveillance program for the disease, and it is expected that we might find such cases periodically."

A column in *Scientific American* magazine crunched the numbers and agrees that finding a positive case of BSE every few years is to be expected.

"According to the USDA's livestock slaughter summary report of April 2012, 34.1 million cattle were slaughtered last year, and 8.7% were dairy cows, which typically end up as ground beef rather than as steaks. According to a paper by [prion disease expert Paul] Brown

and his colleagues [at the National Institutes of Health], about 10% of sporadic human cases occur in middle-aged individuals whose cattle-equivalent age is about seven to 13 years, when dairy cows typically face slaughter," wrote managing editor Philip Yam. "So that means about 0.3 sporadic cases of BSE (or 34.1 million x 0.087 x 0.10, divided by one million) can be expected to occur each year, or one every three to four years.

"That's a very low rate," he continued. "And even if a couple of slaughtered dairy cows with sporadic BSE slipped into our food supply over the past 10 years, the risk of contracting the human form of the illness is extraordinarily low."

share are still sharp. Before domestic BSE, U.S. export markets were valued at \$3.186 billion in 2003. But they plummeted to just \$631 million in 2004 and did not regain the \$3-billion-per-year mark until 2010. Naturally, the fourth BSE announcement left many watching foreign response closely and cautiously.

Science prevailed, with rational responses across the globe. Trading partners remained confident in the safety of U.S. beef, a testament to the quality of our interlocking, science-based safeguards. With minor exception, export markets remained open without new restrictions.

“There is no need for change” to Japan’s import policy, declared Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura — a drastically different response from the country’s panicked reaction to the United State’s first case of BSE. Once the largest importer of U.S. beef, Japan halted imports for two years, only to reopen with the strictest age requirement in the world. That age

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requirement is still in place today. Within the last year there had been talk that Japan may consider amending its 20-month age requirement to align with the scientific standard of 30 months. The U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) says that seems to be off the table for now.

Mexico, which now buys more U.S. beef than any other country, maintained imports, too. Likewise, the European Union, China and Canada continued trade as usual. Vietnam, which suspended U.S. beef imports between December 2003 and September 2011, also did not change its policy.

Thailand originally announced a trade suspension, but quickly retracted that decision. Trade with Thailand remains open to boneless beef from cattle less than 30 months.

The only disruptions came from South Korea and Indonesia.

Two supermarket chains in South Korea, the world’s fourth-largest importer of U.S. beef, pulled retail sales. But within hours, one had already resumed sales. The ministry

temporarily increased import inspections, while keeping trade open to beef younger than 30 months. By contrast, South Korea had imposed a six-year ban on all U.S. beef imports after our first BSE case in 2003.

Indonesia responded by restricting imports to only boneless beef cuts, shunning variety meat, bone-in muscle cuts and other beef products. Even before the BSE announcement, Indonesia had been tightening its market this year as part of an initiative to bolster its domestic beef production, according to the USMEF.

Maintaining market access is only part of the battle on the export front. Consumers in those markets must remain confident in the safety and quality of U.S. beef. As such, the USMEF works with industry partners and media contacts in other countries to dispel misinformation.

“This really underscores the importance of the support we receive from the Beef Checkoff Program, the USDA Market Access Program and all of our partners in the U.S. industry,” said USMEF president Philip Seng. “It’s very important that we continue to reinforce our commitment to consumer safety and explain the multiple safeguards we have in place to ensure the safety and quality of U.S. beef.”

