



Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

It's seldom as bad as it first appears

When I first heard the announcement of the then "presumptive positive" case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Washington state, the only thought on which I could focus was summed up in the words of an Alan Jackson song — "Where were you when the world stopped turning?" Granted, the song was written in tribute to a far greater disaster, but on Dec. 23, 2003, those words surely seemed appropriate for a situation that hit very close to home.

Take a deep breath

As I contemplated whether the news should change my Christmas travel plans, I started to receive e-mails from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), providing details of what was known about the situation. Within an hour we were able to listen to a teleconference in which NCBA presented more background on the case and spelled out measures being taken.

USDA and NCBA earned their stripes by having the right sources available for media interviews (even through the holidays), by presenting the facts, dispelling rumors and speaking with one voice. Teleconferences were, and continue to be, provided regularly to keep the media abreast of new findings in the ongoing investigation.

Both USDA and NCBA provided Web sites — www.usda.gov and www.bseinfo.org, respectively — to disperse the latest information on the situation.

While we're far from being back to

normal, each morsel of information has made the situation less ominous and the future seem a little more bright. I knew we'd be OK when my mother-in-law served beef for Christmas dinner.

Actually, I think we in the ag media made a lot bigger to-do over the situation than the public sector. That's as it should be, though our own panic doesn't help the market situation or allay consumer fears.

What it has done is put the industry on notice as to ...

- the virtual necessity of a national identification (ID) system that allows individual animal traceback;
- the importance of being prepared to handle emerging diseases and other threats to our nation's cow herd;
- the insecurity inherent in depending on export markets for profitability; and
- the importance of having a game plan to provide the facts to consumers when activists are all too ready to exploit a situation for their own cause.

We can count our blessings that the

timing of the incident was on our side. As families gathered for the holidays, who wanted to listen to bad news? And while markets dropped, they did so from record-high prices that were in themselves starting to cause problems.

I don't want to appear to be making light of the situation or the hardship that it has undoubtedly caused, but I'm a firm believer that we create our own dynamic.

Visit USDA's and NCBA's Web sites to get informed. As an industry, let's prepare for any future problems so we can forego any unnecessary calamity.

Get convention news

Industry leaders were to tussle with several hot issues as five industry organizations met in Phoenix, Ariz., Jan. 28-31, for the 2004 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and Trade Show. Log on to www.4cattlemen.com for API's real-time coverage of the event. You won't want to miss reports of these convention topics:

- Cattlemen's College sessions;
- national ID program;
- country-of-origin labeling;
- private property rights;
- discussion of BSE;
- the export situation;
- new beef products and promotions;
- mandatory price reporting;
- the status of country-of-origin labeling;
- trade show highlights, including features of new products; and
- winners of the stewardship and vision awards.

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