

Policy Pennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

## Is it "hysteria" or "an abundance of caution"?

Nothing changes the policy making environment like a crisis. Two planes fly into the World Trade Towers and the date September 11 is indelibly etched in our brains. Today we are willing to submit to airport security measures that would have been unthinkable just five years ago. We thought security measures like that were confined to flights into Israel's Lod Airport, but today they are commonplace.

One six-and-one-half year old cow in the state of Washington is diagnosed with what is generally known as Mad Cow Disease and the policy environment turns upside down. Of course the fact that more than thirty countries have shut themselves from the importation of U.S. beef and beef products and estimates of the initial cost to domestic producers may run as high as \$2 billion may have something to do with that. A recent news report on National Public Radio featured a cattle producer who said the reaction to the diagnosis of that one cow with BSE cost him \$125 a head when he took some cattle to market in the days following the disease announcement.

Before the December 23, 2003 announcement of the finding of one animal in the U.S. with BSE, those who advocated for measures like exercising greater scrutiny of downer cattle at the slaughterhouse were accused of hysteria and ignoring the findings of sound science. For years critics have called for policies ranging from testing of all downer cattle for BSE before allowing the meat into the human food chain to calls for the elimination of downer cattle from the human food chain. Some USDA veterinarians even resigned their positions because of the pressure to more quickly put the USDA stamp of approval on these critters.

The argument was that each of these animals represented \$500 to the producer with the 150,000 to 200,000

downers each year providing a value of \$75 to \$100 million. From the packers point of view, if the veterinarian spent too much time examining a downer animal the line might have to slow down and that would cost them money. The pressure was on to keep everything flowing smoothly. The policy was to test as many as 20,000 high-risk (downer) animals each year for BSE. It was one of those tests that caught the Washington cow.

A week after making the announcement of the finding of the BSE infected animal, Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman announced, "effectively immediately USDA will ban all downer cattle from the human food chain." How did the secretary make the 180 degree turn in policy?

Dr. Ron DeHaven, the chief veterinary officer for the USDA, characterized the decision as the department's "acting out of an abundance of caution."

Sometimes, when it comes to public policy, including agricultural policy, a single event changes everything and yesterday's "hysteria" becomes today's "abundance of caution." I would suggest that what has changed is not the science, for often both sides make their appeal to science, but rather the willingness to accept a given level of risk. Those who in the past called for measures like the testing or banning of all downers were not necessarily ignoring "sound science," rather they were simply less risk tolerant than some producers and packers.

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