

BSE, a case of do unto others.....

A spontaneous case of BSE tomorrow in Australia could see our export markets close their borders to our beef, just like we shut our borders to the US in 2003 when they had a case of BSE. Prior to this the US could export product to Australia – they exported all of 34 tonnes of beef per year over the 5 years before the ban. This compares to Australia exporting around 300,000 tonnes of beef per year, on average to the US.

Trade is a two way street, we can expect to be treated the way we treat our trading partners, it's as simple as that. Science has moved on and the old policy of a blanket ban is no longer supported by science and cannot be defended if challenged by a trading partner in the World Trade Organisation.

Under the old policy, not only were we at risk from trade retaliation but also domestic beef could have been removed from the shelves. This would have a disastrous and long-term impact on the entire beef production chain. All sales, deliveries, processing, wholesaling and retailing would grind to an immediate halt with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

Given the recent hysteria created by some parliamentarians around this issue, you can only imagine what one case would do to the sales of our largest, single biggest market – our own domestic market.

It's in the long-term interests of Australian beef producers that the new policy came into affect March 2010. Under the new policy, the Cattle Council is demanding that traceability in the import protocol delivers, for every kilo of beef that comes into Australia, the same outcomes that our own producers are expected to meet. That is, traceback and traceforward, including cohorts. We expect no more or no less to what we currently deliver to consumers. Any overseas country wishing to export beef to Australia must first make an application to the Australian Government's BSE Food Safety Assessment Committee for individual country risk assessment and Biosecurity Australia will conduct country specific quarantine determinations based on animal health. In addition, a formal Import Risk Analysis (IRA) will be conducted.

It is not that Cattle Council is opposed an IRA for some countries if there is a scientific justification for doing so. (Note that IRAs are country and product specific). There may be some markets deemed to be a higher risk for a whole range of reasons and in these instances Cattle Council would be the first to demand the full 'belts and braces' analysis. However, in terms of trade risk, beef producers are highly sensitized to the fact that if ever Australia was to suffer the unthinkable and find BSE here in Australia, we will be asking the 114 countries we export 67% of our production to, to judge us on scientific risk.

We are not immune to BSE. Recent public comment that we are an "island nation" and hence can't ever find this disease in our herd is a complete nonsense; a typical BSE can appear at any time, as it did in the US on two occasions. If we ever suffer a case of BSE, we would expect that we would still be deemed low risk and hence our re-entry into export markets must be expedited or this industry's future will be in serious trouble.

We are one of the nation's most valuable rural sectors, world's biggest exporter of beef and have a clean and green reputation both here and overseas. The Cattle Council, representing the interests of the nation's beef producers is ensuring we retain this status now and into the long-term future, in addition to retaining our markets.

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