

Mr. Chairman, first, let me thank you for convening this timely and important hearing. I appreciate the committee making the accommodation to allow me to appear this morning. Madam Secretary, Commissioner McClellan and Senator Durbin, welcome. The level of participation in BSE roundtables and panels across the country, as well as the interest in this hearing, is one more sign that government, industry and the retail sector, are taking this matter very seriously and will take all necessary and reasonable measures to isolate this occurrence and prevent future incidents.

Let me start by stating that U.S. beef is safe. When a single, BSE positive cow was found in Washington State, our food safety policy and safeguards worked. USDA acted quickly and effectively. Where there was room for improvement, I believe USDA has seized the opportunity to make them.

I think everyone will agree that we have learned a tremendous amount from the single finding. Future policy recommendations will obviously need to take into account those changes that are believed necessary as a result of the recent finding, especially as we learn what worked, what did not, and what we need to know in the future. We must continue to implement the requisite measures to assure further protection of the food supply, but there is no reason to question the integrity of American meat safety and the overall safety of the system.

I believe that the government is taking a hardline stance against further incidence of BSE in the United States - as evidenced by the major announcement by the Secretary several weeks ago. While we had hoped this day would never come, it was an eventuality that we had prepared for.

As members of Congress, it is our duty to help enact legislation that protects the consumer and safeguards our national food supply. However, consumer protection and national security must not stifle the ability of the agriculture industry to produce food efficiently and affordable. If they do, we will have undermined the very goals that we were attempting to accomplish. Over-burdensome rules and regulations will crimp the ability of agriculture to provide our nation with food, threatening our nation's independence and security by making us dependent on foreign nations - nations that may not place as much emphasis on safety as we in the United States do.

In simple terms, our food supply policy must avoid the pitfalls of our energy policy - we cannot afford to rely on other nations to provide us with food - we must produce it ourselves. I shudder at the thought of having 67 percent of our food supply shipped in from friend and foe - we must do all we can to avoid such an extreme circumstance.

While the government has taken strong steps to contain the present incidence and to prevent future occurrences, I cannot emphasize enough the enormous burden of responsibility that rests

with the agriculture industry. We have had our warning - we must take it very, very seriously. If we do not, we will pay for it with the economic life of the producer and retailer. If rules are not followed, if regulations are not adhered to, no one has more to lose than those who failed to follow them. A 25 percent failure rate when it comes to complying with feed regulations will not afford the level of protection we need to maintain the integrity of animal health.

In the past several weeks, the USDA has taken several steps that, while not necessarily embraced by all with open arms, were received by an overwhelming majority of the industry as the proper response to the task at hand. We all realize that the finding of BSE is a serious challenge to consumer confidence and the industry's financial stability and that the Government must take strong measures to bolster confidence and ensure consumers that American beef is a safe and wholesome product.

I believe Secretary Veneman took that first step with her policy announcement several weeks ago. Given the urgency caused by the discovery of BSE in the United States, I believe that these actions by the USDA will enhance the safety of the American food supply. The three major policy directives dealing with downer animals, verification, and specified risk material, are a step in the right direction - but, as is always the case - the devil remains in the details.

As a veterinarian, I am committed to the idea that any measures imposed must be science-based. While these measures do have sound footing and are logical decisions given the characteristics of BSE, there is still much work to be done. Much work must be done on defining and identifying "downer" animals. This issue has been highly controversial and much discussion has taken place on the matter on Capitol Hill. Are animals with nerve damage from calving to be forbidden? Or only aged and sick animals? Who will be the one to determine which case is which? These are the questions that must be worked out - at great length - by those most knowledgeable about the industry and food safety. I am also hopeful that the USDA will provide my constituents with further guidance when it comes to matters like dentition and animal age verification.

In terms of verification and traceability, a true verification and identification program - perhaps using retinal scanning and other biometric technologies - would provide immediate background resources on the origin and presence of every animal, leaving marketing to the retailer and the producer. It would provide answers in times of emergency and provide closure during the critical first hours of an epidemiological investigation. A credible identification plan must take into account identity and location - a fact that I encourage the USDA to consider when developing their forthcoming identification plans. At this time, I would ask the Chairman that the full text of a statement I entered into the Congressional Record last week on this issue, be inserted into the committee's record as well.

While such a verification program will indeed cost producers money, I believe that retail chains would eventually demand such assurances anyway. In the long run, such verification will enhance the value of the product and prove a valuable tool in domestic and international sales.

As implementation of the USDA directives moves forward, I encourage the USDA to continue working cooperatively with the beef industry. Together, we will not only improve food safety, but we can also restore access to important markets, a critical component of our economy.

Food safety goes hand in hand with the restoration of our markets. We have all seen the list of nations that have banned US beef. We must work diligently to reopen these markets and to reestablish the trust and confidence that I know the US beef industry deserves. As we continue to traceback, traceforward, verify, confirm and cull, we cannot allow nations to block our products under the guise of BSE in order to bolster their own industry or to cultivate relationships with other exporters. A sound process must be put in place immediately that provides assurances to other nations about the quality and safety of the meat they receive. This must be a high priority of the Congress and Administration and I intend to make sure that such discussions take place.

Thank you and remember, this: Beef: It's still what's for dinner!