

Editorial

No Public Health Without Regulation

As many have begun to forget, the original Mad Cow was British Prime Minister (1978-89) Margaret Thatcher, whose insane “deregulation” policies let loose conditions in the British meat industry, by which the scrapie disease jumped from the sheep species, to become Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle—which were eating the nervous system tissue of sheep in their feed—and then to humans, as the fatal, untreatable, and little-understood Variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease. During the 1980s, British rendering plants (where feed meal for livestock is produced) were allowed to lower the temperatures at which they rendered animal parts into protein meal (to save money on energy bills!), recklessly allowing the scrapie and other infectious agents to survive the process; they were allowed to abandon the use of organic solvents in rendering, etc. The human form of BSE, Variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease or CJD, has claimed over 140 lives in Britain since the early 1990s, and a handful of cases have arisen as a result of tainted beef in other European countries and in Japan.

Even as this happened, the broader brain disease of “Thatcherism” spread virulently into the United States, where it infected policy-makers with the dementia of “deregulation” as the cure for all economic problems. It is still a deadly epidemic there, as the appearance of BSE in American cattle confirms.

The British government’s response to BSE was woefully stupid and slow; British beef imports were banned by virtually every country. By the early 1990s, about 185,000 cases of BSE had been identified in British beef herds; and by the time bans on import of British beef or animals were slapped on by other European countries and Japan, BSE had spread into their herds as well.

The disaster of BSE transformed the European cattle industry, and inaugurated new and rigorous universal testing regulations. But the United States did not adopt such regulations, “trusting” instead to a 1997 ban on feeding rendered animal protein feed to ruminant animals (it is still fed to pets and non-ruminants; and a Congressional study found doubts that the ban is well-

enforced), and to the “fact” that U.S. testing had never found a BSE-infected cow.

But compare what American “testing” is: In the United States, testing of cattle for BSE is done on a discretionary basis, testing animals that may be sick or cannot walk (“downers”), or show obvious symptoms of neurological disease. Only about 20,000 animals—less than 1% of the millions slaughtered—were tested last year. The tests are post-mortem brain samples—done after an animal has been slaughtered—and take 8-10 days to give results. By that time, the meat has been processed and often shipped, so these tests cannot easily stop the infected tissue from contaminating a slaughterhouse, or reaching the consumer food chain.

None of this changed with the additional bans announced by the USDA on Dec. 27, except that animals already too sick to walk will now not be slaughtered for beef—as several Congressmen have been trying to legislate for years. The less-than-minimal U.S. testing regime has not been augmented or changed.

By contrast, throughout Europe and most of Asia *every* cow slaughtered is tested for BSE; and although these tests are also post-mortem, they are more advanced tests with quicker results—and *no slaughtered beef goes anywhere until the test results are obtained*. And consider the results: Still, as recently as 2001-02, some 4,000 of the 19 million cattle slaughtered in the European Union countries were found to be diseased with BSE—one in every 500 cows. It’s no surprise that these countries, and Japan and Korea, now have banned beef exports from the United States, where there is still no plan to commit the public health resources and expense for significant—let alone universal—testing of cattle.

The only cure for the Mad Cow disease known as Thatcherism, is to remember that throughout the history of modern industrial republics, deadly epidemic diseases have only been contained and eliminated by rigorous regulation to protect public health—not by good luck, never by the “free market,” and not even by waiting for new scientific cures and vaccines.