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Germany

Livestock and Products

8000 MT of beef recalled after BSE tests by private labs in Germany questioned 2002

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Report Highlights:

Several private company BSE-testing labs in Germany were closed down after inspections showed inappropriate compliance with licencing requirements and BSE-testing procedures. For precautionary reasons, about 8,000 MT of beef are being recalled and destroyed. There is political pressure to restrict BSE-testing to Government (state level) labs.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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Background: In Germany veterinary controls fall under the authority of the 16 states, therefore regulations may differ from state to state. BSE tests are carried out either by state owned or private company labs, that are licensed and checked by the states. BSE tests are mandatory for all cattle over 24 month. End background.

A private lab "Milan" in Bavaria with branches in Passau and Westheim was closed in December after it became apparent that the Westheim branch was not licensed. Since it became operational in July 2001, Milan Westheim carried out 39,500 BSE tests, 46 of which were not in full compliance with the BSE testing procedures. Information about the labs's closure was not forwarded by Bavaria to the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture until mid-January.

Despite the fact that only 46 tests lacked documentation, German officials decided to recall/destroy the meat of all animals older than 24 month that were tested by Milan, Westheim. The line is drawn at 24 month because tests for younger cattle are voluntary. We understand that recall involves about 8,000 MT of meat.

2000 MT of the meat to be recalled was destined for food aid to North Korea. Some of this donated meat was still in a German harbor and was offloaded immediately. Another portion of the donation recently reached North Korea. Two experts are being sent to Nampo, North Korea to destroy those lots that were tested by Milan, Westheim.

As a consequence of this incident, inspections of private labs had been intensified in all states since January. On January 25, the state of Rhineland-Palatinate withdrew the licenses for all 3 private labs there, after inspections showed that two labs had deviated from the standard procedures for BSE-tests. They had reduced the incubation period for the protein transfer from 60 to 45 minutes. 12,700 tests were affected. Those labs had performed tests between March and September of 2001. The Federal Institute for Virological Diseases is currently evaluating the validity of the deviated tests. In the meantime the meat tested by the two labs is being recalled. It is however doubtful that it can be fully retrieved given the time frame of the testing.

On February 6, a small lab was closed in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. Inspections had shown an insufficient number of test repetitions (two or three instead of the required four sets). The lab had carried out about 9,000 tests, of which 3,000 were required tests of cattle over 24 months and 6,000 voluntary tests of cattle younger than 24 months.

Pressure is building to have BSE-tests carried out by Government (state) labs only, as private labs compete on the basis of price and speed, which may result in less accuracy. Private labs were originally licensed because of insufficient capacity at Government labs, when BSE tests became mandatory in Germany for all cattle above 30 months of age on December 6, 2000, and over 24 months on February 1, 2001. Bavaria has decided to set uniform fees for BSE tests to prevent quality from being a victim to price competition.

Implications on beef consumption are difficult to forecast. Authorities unanimously stress that the meat is being recalled because of lack of compliance not because of any threat to human health. Any possible impact on consumption could also depend on the press coverage. On February 5, 2002 a high level political radio magazine and a TV morning show featured interviews with Minister Kuenast and the main evening news covered the topic. Newspapers carried the topic only on the inner pages.