United Kingdom

Livestock

UK Government lifts beef-on-the-bone ban

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Report Highlights:
After two years in force, the UK Government is to lift its ban on sales of beef-on-the-bone. The ban was introduced in December 1997 following concern expressed by scientific advisors that bone marrow might transmit BSE, or "mad cow disease", to humans.

Speaking in the House of Commons on November 30, 1999 the UK Government's Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food, Nick Brown, announced the that the UK's beef-on-the-bone ban is to be lifted.

The announcement followed advice received from the Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland and Wales, who now agree that it is safe to lift the ban on retail and catering sales (note: the ban will remain on beef bones used in food manufacturing). In his announcement, Minister Brown said he would use accelerated procedures in an endeavor to lift the ban by December 17, 1999. He also dropped a broad hint that no action would be taken if shops and restaurants started to serve T-bone steaks and ribs of beef before the ban was officially lifted: "I know that enforcement authorities will wish to take note of my statement" he said.

The controversial ban has been in place for two years. It was introduced on December 15, 1997 by former Minister of Agriculture Jack Cunningham after advisors said bone marrow might transmit BSE to humans. The ban meant it was illegal to sell the following cuts of British beef: fore-rib, T-bone steak, porterhouse steak, top rib, wing rib, blade bone, on-the-bone brisket and sirloin. Oxtail, soups and stock cubes were also affected. Prior to the imposition of the ban, beef-on-the-bone cuts accounted for 5 percent of the UK beef market. As a consequence the beef industry has lobbied hard over the past two years for the ban to be lifted, arguing that the sector was losing around BPS140 (USD230) million a year as a result of the ban.

When the ban was introduced it was greeted with a mixture of anger and dismay by farmers and consumers alike. Indeed, some people continued to serve and eat beef on the bone illicitly, and T-bone steaks remained widely available to those in the know at restaurants around the country. Scottish hotelier Jim Sutherland achieved notoriety after he risked six months in jail and a £1000 fine by serving T-bone steak to 170 farmers at a "prohibition dinner" while the most high-profile act of defiance came when Prince Charles publicly tucked into a rib of beef during a beef and lamb promotion in Newport, South Wales in August of this year. The ban always risked becoming unsustainable. In fact, just last month more than 1000 shoppers openly dined on T-bone steaks at a retail center in Cornwall.

It had been widely reported that Minister Brown has been ready to lift the ban for England for some time following advice from Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer for England. However, he waited until similar advice was available from Mr Donaldson's counterparts in Scotland and Wales (food safety being a devolved issue) before making his announcement. Chief medical officers for Scotland and Wales, who had until now recommended that the ban should stay, changed their minds following the findings of a new report. The report, by scientists from Oxford University, concluded that there was no longer a risk that beef on the bone was contaminated with BSE.

The lifting of the ban has been widely welcomed by both farmers, retailers and consumers. While some retail chains and many independent butchers have already started selling beef-on-the-bone cuts, the Meat and Livestock Commission has announced that once the ban is officially lifted it will launch a major poster and newspaper advertising campaign in support of beef-on-the-bone sales.