

ACFEH Information Paper 5

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

Partial Resumption of US Beef Imports

This paper sets out the background of and justifications for the Administration's decision to resume the imports of some categories of US beef.

Background

2. Two cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), commonly known as Mad Cow Disease, were found in cattle in the US on 23 December 2003 & 24 June 2005 respectively. As a result, importation of US beef and beef products into Hong Kong have been suspended since December 2003.

3. During our negotiation with the US Department of Agriculture on the resumption of importation of US beef to Hong Kong, the lack of a national animal identification system was the major obstacle in ensuring the safety of US beef imports. Until recently, the US has agreed to include conditions of traceability in the Bovine Export Verification Programme (BEV) requirements for Hong Kong. Other gist of the programme included -

- i) Boneless skeletal muscle cuts of beef from cattle less than 30 months of age;
- ii) Tissues classified as Specified Risk Materials (SRM) are to be removed in a hygienic manner in such a way as to prevent contamination of the meat. This includes the removal of the head and severing of the spinal cord with separate tools and separate sanitizers, the clean removal of the spinal cord (e.g. by vacuuming) and proper washing of the carcass;
- iii) Dedicated tools and saws for carcasses over thirty months (OTM); and
- iv) Cattle are not stunned with devices injecting compressed air or gas into the cranial cavity and are not pithed.

The above BEV is similar to the products and conditions imposed on Canadian beef products. HK and US authorities are now finalising the import protocol with an aim to resume importation as soon as possible.

BSE Control Measures Taken by the US

4. At the last ACFEH Meeting held on 6 December 2005, some Members expressed concern on the proposal to resume US beef and demanded further justifications. On tracing system, while the US still lacks a national animal tracing system, the Administration still considers that beef from designated processing plants which are able, with the assistance of the US authority, to trace the cattle back to the farm of origin, an acceptable alternative. The US has also implemented control measures to reduce the likelihood of further BSE outbreaks. These measures include animal feed bans, enhanced surveillance, prohibition of diseased cattle being slaughtered for food and a review of the testing of suspect cases in accordance with international standards.

5. In the two investigatory visits (in June 2005 and November 2005) made by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department officials to observe US control measures and auditing procedures for sanitary measures and the BEV requirements agreed by US and Hong Kong authorities, they are satisfied with the measures taken by the US authorities and the guarantees they made in the control of and management of BSE.

6. Besides, our decision to resume importation of beef from a BSE infected source is in line with the guidelines of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) which states that, subject to certain slaughter conditions no country should restrict the import of boneless beef from cattle less than 30 months of age, whatever the BSE status of the exporting country. Members may wish to know that based on the same principle, importation of Canadian beef has also been partially resumed since 30 November 2004.

7. Since the US has complied with the necessary slaughter conditions and provided an alternative cattle-tracing mechanism to quickly contain the spread of BSE infected products in case of a BSE outbreak, the Administration considers it appropriate from food safety angle to lift the import ban on US boneless beef from cattle less than 30 months of age by end of this year. Coincidentally, Members may also wish to note that Japan formally announced on 12 December 2005 the resumption of selected US beef imports.

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
December 2005**