



Up Front

by **JOHN CROUCH**, executive vice president, American Angus Association

A day we won't soon forget

The time was around 4:45 p.m., Tuesday, Dec. 23, 2003. I was preparing to leave the offices of the American Angus Association when I received a call on my cell phone from Scott Johnson, our director of Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) Department, informing me that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had just announced that a presumptive positive case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) had been discovered in a dairy cow in the northwestern part of the country.

Rapid response

Wow. The day that everyone in our domestic cattle industry had subconsciously and fearfully anticipated finally arrived. This discovery was sure to set in motion a chain of events unprecedented in the history of the American beef industry. Where those events would lead us wasn't yet known.

Scarcely an hour had passed when National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Terry Stokes convened an emergency

telephone conference call of affiliate organization officers and staff to activate the industry's pre-designed BSE response plan. Within two hours, USDA hosted a press conference during which Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman apprised American consumers, the media and the world of the situation.

Fifteen minutes later, NCBA followed suit by hosting a news conference with some 120 participants, including the major news networks, media representatives and industry affiliates. During the conference, NCBA provided relevant scientific facts and accurate information about the situation, assuring consumers of the safety of our beef supply.

The ensuing investigation, which was orchestrated by the USDA, quickly revealed that the cow had been a 6½-year-old animal imported to the United States from Canada and born prior to the adoption of the ban on the use of ruminant meat-and-bone meal in cattle feed, which was instituted in 1997. These two discoveries brought a tremendous sigh of relief to American beef producers.

Further chronology of this animal health issue (and that's exactly what it is, an animal health issue — not a human disease issue) can be found at www.bseinfo.org.

Consequences

Several weeks have now passed. The initial media frenzy is somewhat over, but we still continue to fight the BSE battle every day, and we will for some time to come. While our domestic demand for beef has held strong, and consumer confidence is at high levels, re-establishing export markets and continuing to educate a vast array of media and consumers are still huge hills to climb. It's going to take the cooperation of everyone in this business — the government, the beef industry organizations and the producers — to patch the injuries that were suffered Dec. 23, 2003.

The United States of America has stood fast for 228 years. She has withstood wars, droughts, scandals, bad politicians, good politicians and a host of other adversities. The current

U.S. cattle population stands at just less than 100 million head. Out of this number, a single, imported, middle-aged dairy cow from Canada was diagnosed with BSE within our borders.

The current population of the world is approximately 6 billion people. According to NCBA's BSE Web site, variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob's Disease (vCJD) was first documented in the United Kingdom in 1996. As of January 2004, the number of definite and probable cases of vCJD, which some believe to be connected to BSE, included 155 cases. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, human beings were known to suffer from vCJD at the rate of one per million long before BSE was discovered in cattle. My point is simply that the odds of BSE causing a human health problem are slim to none.

Even so, the finding of BSE in the United States is bound to affect our industry in several ways. First, development of a long-discussed national animal identification (ID) program will be hastened. Second, additional regulations will be put in place to further ensure the credibility of our beef safety system, which in turn will enhance normal activity of beef exportation. Lastly, at the end of the day, the American beef industry will be more unified than ever as to direction and purpose. As we all saw after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, crisis has a way of bringing people together.

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Valuable resource

We certainly recognize and appreciate the efforts of USDA in locating and pinpointing this problem and the efforts of NCBA for its timely action in gathering and releasing scientific, factual information to the industry and the public.

When you consider the work NCBA staff did on the front lines and in the trenches of the BSE crisis for you and all beef producers — regardless of your membership status in the organization — their time, expertise and efforts were priceless. NCBA is an organization that is critical to our industry and a valued resource.

I would be remiss in not mentioning

the work that was also done on behalf of the industry with beef checkoff dollars. Those resources were and continue to be targeted at consumers, retailers and the foodservice sector. When you think about it, a dollar per head is a small price to pay when your entire business is at stake. The beef checkoff remains critical to the success of the beef industry.

The American Angus Association will

continue to work hand-in-hand with USDA and NCBA to pass communication on to you and the rest of the industry. We are committed to giving our time, effort and resources to help resume business as usual for Team Angus — and for Team Beef.



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