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U.S. REMAINS FREE OF BSE AND FMD

WASHINGTON, D.C. (March 20, 2001) - The U.S. remains free of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or what's commonly referred to as mad cow disease. There have been no cases of either disease in the U.S., due in large part to aggressive prevention measures designed to protect U.S. cattle herds and assure the safety of the beef supply for American consumers. Below is a summary of facts about FMD and BSE, including prevention measures for both:

Foot-and-Mouth Disease:

Background--Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) is a highly contagious viral disease that does not affect humans but has devastating effects on animals with cloven hooves, such as cattle, swine, sheep, goats and deer. The U.S. has not had a case of foot-and-mouth disease since 1929, an outbreak that was quickly contained and eradicated.

There are seven types of the FMD virus, all of which have similar symptoms. Immunity to one type does not protect animals from other types. The average incubation period for FMD is between three and eight days, but can be up to two weeks in some cases. The disease is rarely fatal but may kill very young animals. Animals that survive are often debilitated and experience severe loss in milk or meat production.

Spread--Foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious virus and can be spread by movement of infected animals, movement of contaminated vehicles, and by contaminated facilities used to hold animals. It also can infect animals through contaminated hay or feedstuffs and if susceptible animals drink from a common water source. While FMD is not considered a threat to human health, people who come in contact with the virus can spread it to animals through clothing, footwear or other equipment/materials. The virus can harbor in the human nasal passages for as long as 28 hours. Wind also can spread the virus through the air.

Economic Effects--If FMD were to occur in the U.S., the degree of economic impact would depend on how quickly the disease was identified and effective control measures put in place. If it was controlled quickly and eradicated, as was the case with the last outbreak in the U.S. in 1929, the damage might be small. However, if the disease became widespread, the economic loss could easily be many billions of dollars.

The most serious effects would result from the necessity of destroying animals in order to eradicate the disease. In addition, countries with FMD experience restricted exports.

Prevention--The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regularly monitors for any disease among U.S. cattle herds and takes aggressive steps to prevent FMD from spreading to the U.S. whenever there is an outbreak in other countries:

- As part of its ongoing surveillance program, the USDA conducts hundreds of field inquiries each year in an effort to detect animal diseases that might affect livestock.

- When there is an outbreak of FMD in another country, the U.S. temporarily prohibits the importation of animals and animal products from the European Union into the United States. These restrictions augment those already in place on ruminants and ruminant products to prevent the introduction of BSE into the U.S.

- The government also prohibits travelers from carrying into the United States any agricultural products, particularly animal products that could spread FMD. Passengers are required to identify any farm contact to Customs and USDA officials. All baggage is subject to inspection. Violations could result in penalties of up to $1,000.

- A team of experts (40 federal, state and University officials) is sent to the European Union - or other country with an outbreak - to monitor, evaluate and assist in containment efforts.

- There is heightened alert at ports of entry and airports to ensure passengers, luggage and cargo are checked as appropriate. This includes placing additional inspectors and dog teams at airports to check incoming flights and passengers.

- USDA officials also are stationed around the globe to monitor and coordinate with the state agriculture officials.

- USDA recently initiated an aggressive public education campaign that includes additional signage in airports, public service announcements, website, and other tools to inform the public about this important issue and steps they can take to prevent it from entering the United States. The USDA also recently established an 800 number to respond to questions from the public, industry and media about the foot-and-mouth outbreak in Europe.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy Summary of Facts:

Background--First diagnosed in 1986, BSE is a degenerative disease affecting the central nervous system of cattle. Commonly known as "mad cow disease," BSE has not been found in the United States, but it has been detected in the United Kingdom and other European countries.

Research from the U.K. indicates the BSE disease agent has been found in brain tissue, the spinal cord and retina (eye) tissue of naturally infected cattle. It has not been detected in muscle meat or milk.

Prevention--A surveillance program begun in 1990 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has found no evidence of BSE in U.S. cattle. In addition, the USDA, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and many arms of the U.S. livestock industry have taken a number of measures for more than a decade to prevent BSE from occurring in the U.S.

Keeping BSE from entering or occurring in this country is a top priority for the beef industry and U.S. government:

- The United States was the first country in the world to implement stringent feed and import bans without having BSE within its borders. No beef has been imported from the U.K. since 1985. In 1989, the U.S. banned the importation of ruminant animals (cattle, sheep, goats, deer, elk and buffalo) and at-risk ruminant products (such as meat and bone meal) from all countries where BSE had been found.

- In 1997, the USDA banned imports of all live ruminant animals and at-risk products from all European countries.

- Also in 1997, the FDA banned the feeding of most mammal-derived protein supplements to cattle and other ruminants because, in Europe, the disease spread through feed containing protein supplements that carried the BSE disease agent. The feed ban is a critical firewall measure and is an extra precaution against BSE. While BSE has not been found in the U.S., the feed ban assures that if BSE somehow ever did get into this country, it would be quickly isolated and eradicated.

- While the 1997 ban is a critical firewall measure, it should be noted that just feeding mammal-derived proteins to cattle does not cause BSE in and of itself. BSE is only spread by feed if that feed is contaminated with the disease agent.

- The USDA also continues to take stringent measures. In December 2000, it banned imports of all rendered animal protein products, regardless of species, from all European countries.

- The U.S. beef industry urges full compliance with all federal regulations and will continue cooperative efforts with the U.S. government to keep America's cattle herds safe from BSE.