

‘Mad Cow’ disease plunges Great Britain into crisis

by Marcia Merry Baker

During the decade that Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of Great Britain, from 1979 to 1990, a series of “free market” decisions deregulated government control of the processing of animal feed, and thereby allowed the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), known as “Mad Cow” disease.

The precise etiology of BSE, and why it first showed up in England (first officially recorded case in 1985), is not known, and may never be known for certain. What is certain, is that the Thatcher government, in the face of this threat, did not take the necessary public health measures to protect food and feed supplies. In fact, the Agriculture and Health Ministry policies of deregulation and privatization, implemented during the Thatcher years and continued under Prime Minister John Major, served to spread BSE to epidemic proportions.

BSE is a degenerative disease of the brain and spinal neurological tissues, fatal to the cow. It appears to have a years-long incubation period, and the transmitting pathogen is thought to be an animal protein particle, or prion (neither a bacterium nor a virus). A stricken animal becomes jittery, and eventually unable to walk. Similar encephalitic veterinary diseases include sheep scrapie, well established in Britain and elsewhere; and encephalopathy of Rocky Mountain elk, and transmissible mink encephalopathy, both in North America.

As of the beginning of 1996, there had been over 168,000 reported cases of BSE-infected cows in Britain, including in the Channel Islands, since 1985. Concerns over BSE have come to include the possibility of its transmission to humans (as well as to other animal species). At present, there are 12 specific cases of human spinal and brain degeneration in Britain, under study for a possible pathogen link to BSE.

The usual human version of brain and spinal tissue degeneration is a very rare condition called Creutzfeldt-Jakob dis-

ease (CJD). Perhaps only one person in a million, and usually an elderly person, dies from CJD in a year. However, the 12 CJD-like cases in Britain now under study, all involve younger people, and show other significant differences from classical CJD. (Ten of the 12 persons afflicted are now dead.)

It was the announcement to Parliament by Health Minister Stephen Dorrell on March 20, that the BSE link to humans was being investigated, which was the occasion for a fierce, international reaction to years of Thatcherite negligence and prevarication over BSE.

Nations take defensive action

In the days following the Dorrell speech to Parliament, dozens of nations took unilateral actions in the interests of the safety of their food supplies, and of their farm sectors.

On March 21, France announced the banning of British beef. On March 22, other European Union (EU) members, including Germany, Portugal, and Denmark, did likewise, as did South Korea, New Zealand, and many other nations.

These initiatives mark a sharp break with the pattern of nations acquiescing to the “one world government” agencies claiming the right to dictate policies to nations on food and other vital issues. The new World Trade Organization (WTO), and similar supranational regional “free trade” blocs, have all condoned Britain’s inaction on BSE.

On March 21, the European Union Commission in Brussels denounced France’s ban on British beef as illegal under EU treaty rules. However, on March 22, confronted with the overwhelming solidarity of dozens of nations banning British beef, the EU Commission reversed itself, and announced the opinion that when a nation is taking precautionary action against a perceived immediate threat, its unilateral government action is not violating EU practice.

In 1990, the opposite happened, and the EU faced down national governments. On May 30, 1990, France banned all imports of British beef; on June 1, West Germany did the same; and on June 6, Italy followed suit. But on June 7, the EU Commission in Brussels promised to tighten measures to curb BSE, including banning the use of bovine offal in cattle feed, and France, West Germany, Italy, and other nations rescinded their bans on imports of British beef.

But British laissez-faire health measures continued, and today's "Mad Cow" disease threat now poses the necessity of rejecting the EU's usurpation of the rights of national sovereignty.

The Geneva-based World Trade Organization is looking especially bad. Despite the obvious threat of BSE in several nations' cattle herds and beef supplies, when the WTO started up last year, it negotiated the International Bovine Meat Agreement, to replace its predecessor (the Arrangement Regarding Bovine Meat, in force from January 1980 to Dec. 31, 1994), with no attention to BSE at all. The WTO instead stressed demands for "greater liberalization" of the international meat and livestock market, and "progressive dismantling of obstacles and restrictions to world trade to the benefit of consumers, producers, importers, and exporters," according to the WTO's publication "The International Markets for Meat: 1994-1995." Now, most nations have banned British beef; so much for the WTO.

Thatcher's deregulation

Any international effort truly dedicated to improving food and health, would have assisted veterinarians, microbiologists, and public health experts in typing and dealing with the patterns and pathogens involved in BSE. These are some of the relevant features of the disease:

- Pathogens similar to BSE are transmissible through ingestion of animal proteins, in particular brains and neurological tissue. This is so with sheep scrapie, and with transmissible mink encephalopathy (TME), a disease that plagues U.S. mink farms, because minks are carnivores, and must be fed meat; the meat has to be pathogen-free in order to prevent TME. In New Guinea, people practicing cannibalism acquired Oravske kuru, a CJD-like disease of dementia. Therefore, on no account should suspect animal protein be recycled into livestock feed.

- Pathogens similar to BSE are stable in soil, potentially for many years. Therefore, sufficient quantities of corrosive chemicals, such as quicklime, need to be added to the buried carcasses of infected animals. Burial sites should be kept "off limits."

- To be on the safe side, entire herds, not merely the single infected cow, should be culled.

Under Thatcherism, none of these precautionary measures was respected.

Four months after taking office in 1979, the Thatcher government decided to loosen regulations on allowing animal

wastes to be processed into animal feed, despite strong warnings against this.

In 1978 and 1979, scientific reports had called for tightening hygienic regulations on recycling rendered dead animal byproducts into animal feed—among other things, because of the threat posed by sheep infected with scrapie, the BSE-type disease that had long been rampant in Britain.

A Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution specifically warned that because of the presence of scrapie, processing sheep byproducts into cattle feed would carry the "risk of transmitting disease-bearing pathogens to stock and thence to humans." The commission drafted proposals for tight licensing conditions for processing animal proteins.

These proposals were dismissed by the Thatcher government, which insisted on deregulation of the feed industry. Officials said the government might offer guidelines, but the industry could practice "self-regulation."

The disaster was in the making as of 1981, at least, when the processing procedures for animal wastes were drastically changed to cut costs. Cooking temperatures were reduced, as was the amount of time the wastes were cooked. Also, chemical solvents used to clean the processing equipment were no longer considered necessary. So the scrapie agent, and any other pathogens present, were no longer deactivated. They were transmitted, via animal feed, to cattle.

In 1985, the first "Mad Cow" case was officially reported in Britain. In November 1986, the first diagnosis of BSE was made. In June 1988, Britain made BSE a notifiable disease, and in 1989, Britain banned human consumption of cattle brains and certain other organs. But the feed practices remained lax, and only the individual stricken animals, not the herds, were eliminated.

In the 1980s, there were British exports of tainted animal feed, as well as infected cattle; BSE cases showed up in Switzerland, France, Germany, Oman, Ireland, and other locations.

In 1990, BSE was made a notifiable disease in the European Union. The EU Commission banned imports to the continent of British live cattle over a certain age. And, under pressure from member governments, the EU claimed that it would tighten up other regulations. But while Thatcher left office in 1990, her legacy continued to spread BSE, as deregulation persisted.

Instead of this review you are now reading of how disease results from mad policies and pathogens—which can be repaired by emergency measures in the national interest—what you are hearing from the media's "talking heads," such as Lester Brown of Worldwatch Institute, is that BSE may be the "inevitable" Chernobyl of the world food system. Brown is on the prowl for catastrophes, in order to rationalize his claim that the Earth is overpopulated. The Worldwatch Institute is a Washington, D.C.-based operation, created in 1974 by private—mostly British—strategic commodities interests, to promote just such Malthusian hysteria.