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Mad Cow Disease Sets Off a Scare in Japan

By JAMES BROOKE

OKYO, Sept. 26 — A beef scare is sweeping Japan after British scientists confirmed a case of mad cow disease in a Tokyo suburb, the first case of the disease outside of Europe.

Historically a fish-eating people, the Japanese took to beef in a big way only after beef imports, largely from the United States and Australia, were liberalized a decade ago.

Since the case was confirmed on Saturday, McDonald's, which has 3,700 outlets in Japan, has posted prominent signs declaring that all its beef comes from Australia. At last count, nearly 2,000 schools had pulled beef off their menus.

Beef prices in Tokyo have plummeted by 20 percent, and meat packing companies have started prominently labeling their beef as imported either from Australia or the United States, two nations deemed to be free of the disease. Beef from Kobe, known worldwide for its high quality, is not believed to be at risk because it is so far from the infected areas.

British government scientists determined that a 5-year-old Holstein at a dairy farm in Shiroi, near Tokyo, carried the disease, formally called bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or B.S.E. Although the cow had shown symptoms before it was slaughtered on Aug. 10, tests performed in Japan on its brain tissue were contradictory. The disruption of air service because of the attacks in the United States delayed getting the second opinion from Britain.

By the time the positive results were in, the carcass was gone. The government said at first that it had been incinerated. Later, officials admitted that the carcass had been recycled into bone meal.

The original source of the infection was probably infected cows or bone meal feed imported from Europe.

The newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun estimated that as many as 2,000 cows in Japan could have come in contact with the contaminated feed. It is believed that aberrant proteins associated with the disease infected cows when they were fed meal containing parts of sheep with a similar illness. In humans, a similar condition, believed to be caused by eating infected meat, causes dementia and eventually death.

The Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry here has announced a $25 million project to test one million cows. Some critics say, though, that the same ministry lowered the nation's guard to the problem by suppressing a European Commission
report last summer that concluded that the disease could develop here. The ministry objected to a rating of 3 for Japan on a scale of 5, with countries already infected rated 4 and 5. At the time, the Agriculture Ministry defended the decision to play down the report, saying officials were concerned that the announcement of an incorrect evaluation would cause unnecessary public alarm.

Now government health workers face the daunting task of tracking down all 145 tons of bone meal that may have been contaminated by the cow from the roadside farm in Shiroi, as well as determining the fates of all the other cows that were born with the infected cow on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. The infected cow was shipped south to Shiroi as a 2-year-old.

"We have been insisting that Japan stop importing meat bone meal since March," Hiroko Mizuhara, secretary general of the Consumers Union of Japan, a private group, said angrily today. "But they have just answered: 'No B.S.E. in Japan. It is safe.'"

On Tuesday, the agriculture minister, Tsutomu Takebe, said his ministry was debating a ban on imported meat and bone meal. But he said that locally produced meal was safe, adding, "It is unlikely from this time that problematic cows will enter the meat and livestock feed markets."

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