

BSE

The Scientific Steering Committee (SSC) advising the EC has recently published opinion on the origin and transmission routes for BSE. They confirm the standing scientific consensus hypotheses that a prion of unknown origin is the agent for transmitting the disease; mainly via feed and cross-contamination of feed, and to a lesser extent via maternal transmission.

The SSC considers that not one of the alternative hypotheses about 'third' transmission route e.g. insect pests has so far been substantiated by scientific evidence.

Evidence is equally very limited if not absent for hypotheses about factors influencing the susceptibility of cattle to BSE e.g. organophosphate theory.

The six BSE cases found so far in the UK amongst cattle born after the August 1996 ban on feeding meat-and-bone meal to cattle give the SSC currently no reason to assume there is a higher BSE risk in the UK than previously assumed. Therefore there is no need to revise scientific advice on the UK Data Based Export Scheme (DBES) or any other BSE related opinions.

The SSC had been asked to address questions about the safety of sheep and goat products if BSE were to be confirmed or become probable in these small ruminants.

Up to date there is no evidence that BSE is present in small ruminants under field conditions. The scientists however do not exclude that sheep were fed with potentially infected/contaminated meat-and-bone meal in the past and therefore reaffirm their view that the risk that BSE is present in sheep cannot be excluded.

A combined rapid testing and genotyping programme would provide the scientific basis for confirming that scrapie-resistant sheep genotypes do not harbour any TSEs. Certification of flocks that are scrapie and TSE free, in combination with better identification and tracing of small ruminants will, according to the SSC, offer the best policy option for the safe sourcing of sheep and goat products and consumer protection in the longer term.

The SSC considers that its previous opinions on specified risk materials that need to be taken out of the food chain will require updating if BSE were to become probable in sheep and goats. As opposed to cattle, where the infectivity remains mainly concentrated in specific body tissues such as the brain and the spinal cord, the evidence points to a more general distribution of BSE infectivity in sheep tissues, possibly similar to the distribution pattern of scrapie.

The Committee however reaffirms its view that sheep and goat milk and milk products do not present a possible risk, provided milk of suspect animals is excluded from the food chain.

Comment

These views would seem to have remained almost static for the past 6 years and are fairly non-committal. BSE has been one of the most urgent drivers for adoption and use of the precautionary principle.

Regulation is still catching up with events. The development of the products Directive at one stage included a proposal to reverse the burden of proof in claims for damages.

Efforts to create scrapie resistant flocks would seem to be a proportionate response when compared with measures (and loopholes) made familiar over the course of 2001. However, if there is evidence of BSE in small ruminants, more drastic measures may be proposed.