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Opinion on the BSE risk from cohort animals: bovine hides and skins for technical purposes

With appropriate precautions the hides from cattle reared in the same herd as a BSE case animal can be used without significant risk to consumers. Commercial losses to third parties are predictable if procedures are not followed accurately.

Bovine hides are used for the production of gelatine and collagen for human consumption. Thus far, BSE infectivity has never been found in cattle hides even from late stage BSE cases but could be if cross-contaminated with high risk material during processing. Removing the hide immediately after slaughter would result in the smallest risk of cross-contamination. Hides should kept separate from hides of uncertain origin and there are labelling requirements that should help identify hides from cattle later found to have detectable BSE contamination.

The opinion is particularly relevant to the handling of so-called cohort cattle. These cattle are those born within 12 months of and/raised in the same herd as an index BSE case. The Scientific Committee recommend that all cohort cattle be traced killed and thoroughly destroyed. The recommendation is applied to various extents and in various guises throughout the EU.

Between 2001 and 2005 the prevalence of BSE was 0.0026% on average but was 0.033% (and rising) in cohort cattle.

The Committee considers that the risk from hides of cohort animals [those with no detectable signs of BSE] is negligible if contamination is avoided. Hide from the head of the cohort animal presents the highest risk.

Cohort animals intended for leather production should be subject to BSE testing. These cattle and hides should be processed separately (in time) from non-cohort cattle, followed by decontamination of premises.

Comment

The strict handling regime for cattle hides leads to commercial risks, regardless of actual contamination with BSE agent. It is possible for products e.g. glue, derived from hides to enter the human food chain.

In our view, the recommended control measures make allowance for the likely failure of control systems in day to day practice; they are more elaborate than would be merited on the basis of risk when systems are working properly.