

Information Piece

The change in the Federal Government's BSE policy

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The recent decision by the Federal Government to alter its policy regarding beef from countries that have experienced Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) has led to concerns from within the beef industry. What is clear regarding the new policy is that the risk of Australia importing BSE-affected product remains negligible; RMAC supported the Government's initiative on this basis.

In 2001 due to the lack of scientific information on BSE, its infection path within livestock and the possible links to variant CJD in human beings the Australian Government introduced a policy that unilaterally banned imports of beef and beef products from BSE-affected countries. This policy was accepted by industry at the time given the limited knowledge we had about the disease and its spread.

Much has since been learned about the disease and today there is unequivocal scientific evidence that supports a change to the above Australian policy. This change is in line with most major trading countries around the world that have put in place more modern safeguards while ensuring their countries remain well protected.

There has been a rapid reduction in the incidence of the disease – there were only 18 cases worldwide in 2009 compared with 37,280 cases reported in 1992 in the UK alone. With the exception of the minor trading nations of Norway, Iceland and Turkey, Australia was the only 'free' ('negligible risk') country with the old policy still in place.

The previous policy treated Australian and imported beef in the same way. So, if a case of BSE was found unexpectedly in some distant corner of Australia, State food/health authorities had the right to remove all beef from domestic shelves right across the country. Therefore in such a case not only would we lose access to our 114 export markets but we could also lose our largest single market for beef – our domestic market. RMAC could not support such an unacceptable situation.

With the absence of scientific support, Australia's previous BSE policy could also have led to crippling retaliation from other countries that, under international trading rules, can impose compensatory measures that would seriously hurt our trade. Given 65% of our product is exported, this was worth avoiding.

As a nation we have strongly supported international trading rules being science based, particularly when arguing for greater access for our products into regions such as the EU and SE Asia. It would be hypocritical for us to continue arguing for an unscientific BSE policy that is now outdated.

Finally, it is unnecessarily alarmist to say we'll be flooded with imports as a result of the decision. Some have gone so far as to predict a similar experience as that faced by the pork industry where imported product has cut deeply into the domestic market. Unlike the pork industry, the Australian beef industry is one of the most efficient in the world, allowing us to compete successfully with other beef-exporting nations into 114 markets on an almost-daily basis. This decision will have no

· Red Meat Advisory Council Ltd (RMAC) is the peak body for Australia's red-meat and livestock industry. Its membership is made up of Australian Lot Feeders' Association, Australian Livestock Exporters' Council, Australian Meat Industry Council, Cattle Council of Australia and Sheepmeat Council of Australia.

effect on the efficiency balance between our industry and that of other countries. Historical beef imports from the US for example saw an average of 34 tonnes entering Australia in the five years before 2001; this compares with the approximately 280,000 tonnes we send to the US each year.

RMAC is being consulted in the drafting of the guidelines under which trade may occur. As this is ostensibly a human-health-related matter the drafting is being done by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ). Through this process RMAC is making clear industry's priorities relating to consistency with international rules, cattle identification and traceability and in-country inspections as part of the approval process. I believe the FSANZ document will be available for wider comment in the final week of February.

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