

**Consumers Union • Center for Food Safety • Center for Media & Democracy
CJD Voice • Consumer Federation of America
Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Foundation • Farm Sanctuary
Friends of the Earth -- U.S. • Government Accountability Project
Humane Society of the United States • Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Organic Consumers Association • Public Citizen**

April 19, 2004

The Honorable Ann Veneman
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington DC 20250
VIA FACSIMILE: 202-720-2166

Dear Madam Secretary:

We are writing to ask you to reconsider your decision to prohibit Creekstone and other companies from testing cattle at slaughter for mad cow disease using government-approved BSE quick tests. While we believe the U.S. Department of Agriculture should be testing all cattle over the age of 20 months for mad cow disease, in the absence of your agency expanding testing, we see no reason for you to stand in the way of companies that want to provide this important safety measure to consumers.

Since the discovery in December of a BSE-positive cow in Washington State, USDA has made little progress toward significantly expanding the mad cow testing program. Until January, USDA was testing at a rate of 20,000 animals per year, a miniscule percentage of the approximately 35 million cattle slaughtered annually. USDA's recently stated intention of testing more cattle — in the range of 200,000 a year — is a positive step. However, USDA has not made a firm commitment to test this number, which is still less than 1 percent of all cattle slaughtered in the United States.

We believe consumers desire this safety testing, and a Consumers Union nationwide poll in January strongly supports that demand. The survey found that 88 percent of those polled somewhat or strongly agreed that USDA should test all animals for BSE. And 77 percent of beef-eating consumers said they would be willing to pay more for BSE-tested beef, with almost all of those asked willing to pay 10 cents a pound more for this testing.

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In the absence of USDA providing the testing that American consumers want and deserve to be fully confident of the safety of the beef they buy with respect to BSE, we believe that beef retailers should be allowed to market BSE-tested beef to consumers. We find it incomprehensible that USDA would stand in the way of companies meeting consumer demand in this way. It is particularly difficult to understand your decision in light of the fact USDA has approved four quick tests for its own use. It makes no difference whether the tests are being used for surveillance purposes, as USDA plans, or to provide added value to consumers by offering an extra margin of safety, as Creekstone plans. The four government-approved tests would be equally valid for either purpose, and to deny their use by the private sector to satisfy consumers' safety concerns is simply unacceptable.

It is also difficult to understand USDA's rationale for prohibiting a U.S. exporter from complying with the food safety standards of another country. Although Japan's beef safety standard in this case is higher than the U.S. standard, there are many instances in which American food safety standards are higher than those of other countries, yet we fully expect those countries' exports to meet our requirements.

We urge the USDA to immediately address this problem by rapidly increasing its testing program to all cattle over the age of 20 months, and by allowing U.S. beef producers in the meantime to conduct government-approved BSE quick tests on beef for both American markets and to comply with other nations' safety standards.

Sincerely,

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Consumers Union

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