

### **POSITION STATEMENT ON THE REQUIREMENTS FOR BSE TESTING OF HEALTHY CATTLE**

SEAC was asked by the Food Standards Agency to consider the change in risk to consumers from exposure to BSE that would result if (a) from 2011, the age threshold for BSE testing healthy slaughter cattle was raised from 48 to 72 months and (b) BSE testing of healthy slaughter cattle was to stop altogether.

FSA presented to SEAC an analysis carried out by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) assessing the impact of reducing the level of BSE testing of healthy cattle slaughtered for human consumption, using a mathematical model developed at VLA. The model predicts the number of additional infected cattle that would be consumed if monitoring is reduced and estimates the consequent impact on the amount of infectivity entering the food supply.

SEAC advises that in the short-term there is an insignificant additional risk to human health that would result from raising the age for healthy slaughter cattle from 48 to 72 months. The VLA modelling results concur with the low numbers of cattle now being identified with BSE. However, SEAC notes that this conclusion is only valid if the prevalence of BSE in the UK cattle population remains at or decreases from its current value. The current and future validity of this analysis therefore depends critically on the nature and quality of BSE surveillance within the cattle population, and in particular its capacity to ensure the early detection of any re-emerging epidemic. This assessment would equally apply to any proposal to cease altogether the testing of healthy slaughter cattle. SEAC considers that any change in the incidence of BSE is most likely to be detected in fallen stock and casualty animals because of the currently higher likelihood of detecting BSE in these sub-populations. Provided that surveillance of fallen stock and casualty animals is sufficient to provide the necessary information about disease incidence and prevalence, the additional risk to consumers of reducing testing of healthy cattle will remain small.

In addition, SEAC offers the following observations that the FSA and other interested Government Departments might wish to consider:

- (a) Surveillance is the only effective means of monitoring changes in the incidence or prevalence of BSE. It is therefore important that current surveillance protocols are kept under review, to ensure that they are capable of detecting an increase in BSE prevalence both in an appropriate time frame and at a suitable sensitivity to detect an

increase in prevalence that would warrant reintroduction of testing healthy slaughtered cattle.

- (b) It is not clear that testing a sample of healthy slaughter cattle older than 72 months would provide much useful information: this age group might be sub-optimal. The arguments for random testing of healthy slaughter cattle at this age, compared to other ages, should be considered carefully, taking account of the purpose of this sampling, the sample size and test sensitivity (by incubation period) amongst other considerations.
- (c) UK data should continue to be used to demonstrate a decline in the prevalence of BSE in the UK herd, rather than relying on EU-wide figures.
- (d) It is instructive to use the VLA model to examine a range of hypothetical rates of increase in BSE infection and the ability of current surveillance measures to detect the change, and this should be repeated as necessary when significant changes to current practices are envisaged.
- (e) Changing one BSE control measure can have knock-on effects on other control measures and it is important that the possibility of such interactions is fully taken into account when a proposal such as this is considered.

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