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European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection

**The importance of having
comprehensive safety legislation on
BSE in place**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of the CEFTA* Countries

Bratislava, 13 September 2001

Ministers

I am very pleased to be in Bratislava today to discuss with you the issue of BSE. I will not waste time on describing the huge impact of BSE in the EU. It is sufficient to say that its political and economic impact has made it one of the most difficult and controversial issues on the agenda of the European Commission over the past several years.

It is not an exaggeration to say that it has led to very deep and significant changes to the structure and role of the Commission and the Community approach towards health and consumer protection. I can point to the following as examples:

- The major changes to the European Treaties to strengthen EU powers in the area of public health;
- The radical re-organisation of the Commission to bring a range of key services together under a single roof and under the direction of a single Commissioner;
- The extensive legislative agenda on key public health and food safety issues, including the proposal to create an independent European Food Safety Authority;
- The renewed emphasis on the need to further reform the Common Agricultural Policy to put safety and quality to the forefront of our approach towards food and agricultural production.

There is a clear risk that the Commission might focus only on the impact of BSE in the EU and to lose sight of its wider implications, including on third countries. This applies in particular to the candidate countries, members of the CEFTA. I have been careful to avoid this mistake. Our shared borders, close cultural and trade links and the enlargement process all combine to ensure that the impact of BSE is felt in your countries also.

I have made a very major effort to keep you informed of developments in the EU in relation to BSE. I have met many of you bilaterally, both in Brussels and in your national capitals. I have written to you on key issues of concern. And I have ensured that my officials in the Commission have established close links with your officials to ensure good co-operation and exchange of information.

My presence in Bratislava today is part of this process as it provides an excellent opportunity for me to meet with you collectively. It is important that there is a shared understanding of the Commission's approach towards BSE. And that I, in turn, have a full appreciation of your approach and views in the matter.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned from the crisis is the damage and confusion caused by different Member States following divergent approaches towards the disease. This has a very damaging impact on consumer confidence as they – consumers - are presented with conflicting messages on what is necessary to ensure their safety.

The Commission approach has one very central objective – the creation of a safe and effective Community-wide framework of measures to ensure that consumers are not at risk. This framework is based on independent scientific advice. Let me briefly outline the principal measures in question:

- The removal of the full range of specified risk materials from cattle, sheep and goats;

* **The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA):** Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria

- The strict controls on the processing of animal by-products and the ban on the feeding of meat and bone meal to all farm animals;
- The comprehensive measures on research, surveillance and eradication of BSE;
- The large number of inspections carried out by the Commission's Food and Veterinary Office on Member State compliance with the protective legislation in force;
- Extensive surveillance measures, including rapid tests, for the presence of BSE in the animal population.

These measures apply also to exports. Thus, for example, when the decision was taken to ban meat and bone meal in animal feed, this ban was extended to exports. And I took the precaution of writing to your ambassadors to the EU to advise them of the ban and of the need to take the necessary measures in relation to any such products imported from the EU, particularly fraudulent exports.

These measures were adopted on an ad-hoc basis over several years. However, they have now been brought together in a single legal text – Regulation 999/2001 – which entered into force on 1 July 2001. It provides a comprehensive framework to address the key issues in relation to BSE – monitoring and surveillance, meat and bone meal, risk classification, eradication, risk materials, laboratory analysis etc.

I am convinced that the full application of these measures ensures the protection of consumers from the risks of BSE. I am equally convinced that this framework serves as a model which should be followed by any other countries where BSE is also present or suspected.

I am very sensitive to the challenge faced by you in protecting your own citizens from any potential risk. I am impressed by your efforts in this respect and the comprehensive measures that have been introduced across the candidate countries. These measures very closely parallel the measures already in place in the Community.

It is not my role to tell you how to approach BSE. However, speaking again from my own experience, I would like to highlight a few issues which are key to a successful strategy:

- First, the approach towards BSE has to be determined by the interests of consumer health – health protection must, therefore, take priority over market considerations;
- Second, all measures must be based on sound and independent scientific advice;
- Third, it is essential that there is a strong framework of legislative measures in place – on the lines I have outlined. These measures must be strictly enforced. Well intended legislation which is poorly implemented is not acceptable;
- Finally, all measures must be communicated in an open and transparent manner to the public. A consistent lesson in the Community is that when consumers have felt that they are not being told the full truth, they respond in the manner they know best – avoidance of beef and beef products.

It has taken a long time – and huge economic and political costs – for these lessons to be learned in the current Member States. You have the opportunity, however, to learn from our experience - and mistakes.

I would now like to turn to a number of other issues which I know are especially sensitive in some of your countries. Firstly, the Community's provisions on imports.

Secondly, the risk classification of your countries by the Commission's Scientific Steering Committee. And, finally, the Commission approach towards BSE in the enlargement process.

Turning to the first issue, the Community provisions on imports....

As I outlined to you earlier the Community provisions on BSE are now to be found in a single legal text, Regulation 999/2001 and its implementing provisions. By-and-large, similar provisions apply to imports of beef and beef products as apply to like products sourced from within the Community.

Thus for example, specified risk materials must be removed from imported products containing meat from cattle, sheep and goats. This will be extended to cover products such as tallow, gelatine and petfood from 1 October. Imports of meat and bone meal are also banned. Similarly, mechanically recovered meat from cattle, sheep and goats and certain slaughtering methods are also prohibited.

From 1 October, countries exporting live animals to the EU will also have to certify that there are effective bans in place on the feeding of mammalian meat and bone meal to ruminants and that there are provisions in place allowing these animals to be traced.

The key determining factor in relation to the measures which apply is the risk classification of the country of import. In the case of the CEFTA countries, all but one fall within category III of the Scientific Steering Committee's risk classification.

Category III is defined as "BSE is likely but not confirmed". I know that many of you were unhappy with this classification. However, I can only repeat what I have previously said: it is based on an assessment of the Scientific Steering Committee.

This process was carried out in an entirely open and transparent manner and on the basis of data supplied by the third countries concerned. It has allowed the Commission to identify the potential risk attached to imports. And to propose the appropriate safeguards to ensure that our consumers enjoy a comparable level of protection in relation to such imports as applies to EU products.

I know that it will provide little comfort to you when I recall that several Member States of the EU were equally unhappy with their classification in category III by the SSC. They insisted that they were BSE free. This extent of this self deception only became evident when the SSC was proved to be correct in its assessment that BSE was likely to be present in these Member States. More importantly, this led them in actively opposing Commission proposals for improved safeguards against BSE.

The delay in putting in place a Community wide requirement to remove specified risk materials is an example. This proposal was initially tabled by the Commission in December 1996. However, owing to lack of support in the Council, an agreed measure did not enter into force until 1 October 2000 – almost 4 years later! This was an unacceptable delay.

Moreover, the confirmation that BSE was much more widespread than officially accepted hugely undermined consumer confidence. To put it mildly, consumers felt very badly let down by the authorities responsible for their protection. This was the critical factor in the collapse in beef consumption which took place in the EU, most notably late last year.

I would like to congratulate the Czech authorities, therefore, for their professional and responsible approach which has led to the disclosure of two cases of BSE. While it was a shock to discover these cases, consumers in the Czech Republic should take encouragement in the responsible approach of their authorities in the matter.

I would appeal to you, therefore, notwithstanding any reservations you may have over your BSE classification, to firmly implement the necessary protective measures. While the cost may be high, it is nothing compared with the potential damage which could arise from having your worst fears confirmed – the presence of BSE in your animal population - when the opportunity to put in place protective measures has been missed.

I would also like to add that there is the necessity to submit dossiers on your epidemiological status to the Commission for assessment under the new Regulation 999/2001 by the end of this year. If you have new evidence or data to suggest that the previous SSC assessment was incorrect you should use this opportunity.

Let me also briefly add that there is no protectionist agenda in the Commission approach on BSE towards third countries. I am responsible for Health and Consumer Protection. I cannot and will not allow my responsibilities towards European consumers to take second place to trade or competitive considerations.

By way of example, several of our biggest trade competitors in meat and meat products – Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay – fall within category I. This is defined as “BSE highly unlikely”. This is the highest and safest category, unfortunately not enjoyed by any Member State of the EU. And very significantly, these countries are exempted from the most rigorous controls such as the removal of SRMs.

In fact, an estimated 85% of the EU’s imports of meat and meat products come from third countries which fall within category I of our geographical risk assessment. This, surely, is the answer to claims that this evaluation process is motivated by protectionism.

I will now turn briefly to the approach towards BSE in the enlargement process. This has to be viewed in the overall context of the Commission approach on the veterinary and phytosanitary chapter of the negotiations. You are already required to meet the import requirements which I have just outlined.

However, I would encourage you to be even more ambitious and to pursue the adoption of the full range of Community measures as part of the “acquis communautaire” as soon as possible. In particular, I would encourage you to put in place comprehensive surveillance mechanisms for the presence of BSE, including the use of rapid tests, to ensure that any potential cases are brought to light, in particular in at risk animals where experience in the Community already points to the highest incidence.

With a view to assisting this process, the Food and Veterinary Office of the Commission will undertake a range of inspection visits to your countries in the coming months. These visits have been invaluable in the Community in identifying weaknesses in the implementation by Member States of BSE controls.

This has of course been a painful process for the Member States concerned. However, it is both necessary and productive. Weaknesses which are not rapidly and decisively put right have the potential to do huge damage. I would like you to view these forthcoming visits in this spirit.

More generally, I hope that we can continue to co-operate effectively across the full range of veterinary and phytosanitary issues, stretching from animal and plant health, residues, animal welfare to, most important of all, food safety.

I have re-oriented the services of my Directorate General decisively towards increased co-operation with your services in these areas. A lot of hard and constructive work – on all sides - is taking place to allow your legislative and control frameworks to adapt to the requirements of accession to the Community.

The further series of inspection visits by the Food and Veterinary Office which are currently underway to assess food safety controls is part of this process.

However, that is an issue for another occasion and today we must concentrate our discussions on BSE. I would like therefore to now hear your views and opinions on the subject and will be happy to respond to your questions. And, finally, I hope that the common declaration which you hope to agree today will focus overwhelmingly on what matters to your citizens – the protection of their health and welfare.

Thank you for your attention.