

Speaking Note of Commissioner Byrne Agriculture Council of 19 December BSE

Since we last met in November, both Finland and Austria have confirmed their first cases of BSE. Clearly, this is a disappointment but it is not entirely a surprise. Hopefully, they will turn out to be very rare cases.

I take some encouragement from the relatively calm public reaction to the discoveries. This contrasts with the reaction 12 months ago when other Member States like Germany, Spain and Italy discovered their first cases of BSE. I believe that this is proof that consumers react in a positive manner when well informed.

The very extensive list of measures put in place in the course of the year have also served to reassure consumers that we are not taking risks with their health.

The situation in other Member States remains calm with no major developments. This is reflected in the figures for beef consumption which are increasingly moving in the right direction as consumers regain their confidence in the protective measures in place.

There are a number of scientific developments of interest.

As you are aware, the Commission discussed with your veterinary experts the current age at which vertebral column is removed from cattle. The view is that the Scientific Steering Committee should be asked to look again at the issue. This is being followed up and the Commission may present further proposals in the light of the Committee's opinion.

It is also the intention to clarify some of the control measures in relation to the removal of the vertebral column. This concerns in particular intra-Community trade and the place of removal. I expect to present a proposal shortly in the matter.

The Commission also expects to present a proposal shortly for an increase in the level of testing of sheep for the presence of TSEs. This will take account of the recent opinion of the SSC on testing of small ruminants. The intention is to obtain a better picture of the true incidence of TSEs in sheep.

This in turn is essential to contingency plans if BSE is ever found to have been transmitted to sheep outside of laboratory conditions. A proposal on improved traceability of sheep is also at a very advanced stage of preparation. This is essential to improved security in relation to both BSE and foot and mouth disease.

Finally, concern over the use of tallow in calf milk replacers has again surfaced. The SSC has issued a number of opinions on the safety of its use. A problem is that the necessary controls are difficult to implement. We may, therefore, need to consider a total ban. This is another issue which we will need to confront early in the new year.

A significant legal development was the decision of the Court of Justice on the measures in place in France in relation to exports of beef from the UK. The Commission is satisfied that it provides important clarification on the substantive issues.

Clearly, the Commission has a duty to uphold the Treaty and it is in this spirit that I have already reminded France of its obligations to respect Community law. However, this is an important case and I know that Jean Glavany needs the time to consult with his colleagues on the way forward.

When we met here exactly one year ago, there was a state of outright panic in relation to BSE. Beef consumption had fallen dramatically and consumer confidence in food safety was at record lows.

Since then we have made huge progress. It has been a difficult process involving a lot of hard decisions. It is useful to reflect briefly on what has been done:

- We are now testing all healthy cattle aged over 30 months;
- At risk and fallen cattle are being tested at 24 months;
- The list of SRMs has been extended to include vertebral column and the entire intestine;
- Mechanically recovered meat from ruminants has been banned;
- Meat and bone meal has been banned in feedingstuffs for all farm animals;
- New controls have been introduced in relation to imports;
- Agreement has been reached between the Council and Parliament on a major regulation on TSEs;
- Major progress has been made on the proposed regulation on animal by-products and hopefully final agreement will be reached under the Spanish Presidency.

We should not lose sight also of the incidence of BSE. The huge explosion in numbers that some predicted earlier this year has not materialised. To the end of October this year there have been less than 1500 cases throughout the EU. This compares to over 37.000 in the UK alone in 1992 alone when the disease peaked.

In addition, there has been huge progress in a range of other important areas - food hygiene and zoonoses, which we will be discussing in a few minutes are only two examples.

More significantly, final agreement has been reached on the Food Safety Authority and it will become operational within weeks. This is an outstanding achievement in which all Community institutions should take great pride.

Clearly, we cannot afford to be complacent. But, nor should we under-estimate the progress that has been made. I hope, therefore, that we can look forward to a quieter, calmer 2002.

Thank you for your attention.