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Mad Cow Case Renews Debate In Congress On Feed Inspection

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WASHINGTON (AP)--Congressional investigators last year sharply criticized federal efforts to keep mad cow disease out of the U.S. after finding weak enforcement of a ban on certain cattle feed considered the likely source of such infections.


The Food and Drug Administration, which regulates animal feed, says enforcement has improved so significantly that 99.9% of the nation's feed companies comply with the ban.

But the agency acknowledges that statistic is based on inspection of company records - not on independent testing of the potentially infectious feed itself. Such tests are still being developed.

So some lawmakers want more proof that the warnings issued in 2002 have been taken seriously.

The government's prevention efforts are getting new scrutiny because the nation's first case of mad cow disease was confirmed last week - in a single Holstein in Washington state.

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The disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is caused by a misshapen protein which attacks the cow's brain, turning it into a sponge. It is linked to a human illness, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, that people can get from eating meat that contains an infected cow's brain or spinal tissue.

Since 1997, the U.S. has banned feeding cattle, sheep and goats any feed that contains brain and spinal cord material. That ban is important because consumption of contaminated feed is the only known way the disease spreads. In the current case, investigators are trying to trace the infected cow's feed.

In January 2002, the General Accounting Office found many firms that should have been complying with the feed ban had not been identified or inspected, and that the FDA had no overall strategy for enforcing the ban. Auditors also said the agency's inspection database was too flawed to assess compliance.

The FDA was already fixing problems when the GAO report emerged and has since increased inspections and improved its data collection, Stephen Sundlof, director of the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine, said in an interview last week with The Associated Press.

Only two of more than 1,800 feed-handling plants are out of compliance with the ban now, Sundlof said. A compliance rate that was 75% when the ban took effect is now nearly perfect, he said.

Every feed facility is inspected at least once a year - a review that allows the FDA to monitor the feed ban perhaps better than any other FDA program, Sundlof said. Still, the agency is pursuing improvements.

"We inspect based on records," Sundlof said. "We don't have good tests to take the feed itself and determine whether it's in compliance. So the records could be perfect, but you could potentially have prohibited material in the feed. We're getting testing methods developed so that, in addition to just inspecting records, we take samples."

Some question the degree of improvement and whether the government has sufficiently explored the range of safeguards needed to prevent the disease.

Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat who requested the GAO report, isn't satisfied with the response by the FDA or the Agriculture Department, which monitors safety of meat and animal health. Durbin plans to introduce a bill in January to further restrict the use of diseased meat or high-risk tissues in animal feed.

"We've asked a couple of times what these agencies were doing with regard to the (GAO) recommendations," said Joe Shoemaker, a spokesman for Durbin. Shoemaker said the expected response should be "either, 'We don't find these recommendations to be on point,' or 'We're going to be implementing them.' They don't seem to have done either."

Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin, senior Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee, has asked the GAO to evaluate the FDA's progress in enforcing the ban. He also asked the GAO to review what precautions are taken on farms to ensure feed is handled properly.

"The evidence we have is that the industry has indeed significantly improved its compliance. But, obviously, the GAO report is very concerning because its conclusions were so much bleaker," said Allison Dobson, a spokeswoman for Harkin. "Our goal is to get an independent review to see how substantial those improvements have been."

Federal officials insist U.S. meat is safe because the brain, spinal cord and lower intestine - parts that

carry infection - were removed from the diseased cow before its meat was processed for human consumption. In the U.K., 143 people died of it after an outbreak of mad cow in the 1980s.

The FDA has considered expanding the ban on cattle brains and spinal tissue in all animal feed, not just meal for cattle, sheep and goats. The government now allows meal containing brain and spinal tissue from cattle to be fed to chickens. One concern is that the government allows mixing chicken waste into cattle feed, another possible route for spreading mad cow disease that critics say should not be dismissed.

On the Net:

General Accounting Office: <http://www.gao.gov>

Food and Drug Administration: <http://www.fda.gov>

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http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,BT_CO_20031228_000513,00.html

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