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OIE Endorses “Controlled Risk” BSE Rating for U.S.

As expected, the World Organization for Animal Health’s (OIE) Scientific Commission has endorsed the recommendation from an OIE expert panel that the U.S. be classified as “controlled risk” for BSE. The OIE’s General Assembly will formally vote on the recommendation at their general conference in May. Ron DeHaven, USDA administrator for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), said, “The controlled risk classification recognizes that OIE-recommended, science-based mitigation measures are in place to effectively manage any possible risk of BSE in the cattle population. This recommendation provides strong support that U.S. regulatory controls are effective and that U.S. cattle and products from cattle of all ages can be safely traded in accordance with international guidelines, due to our interlocking safeguards.” The controlled risk categorization is mid-range in the OIE’s three-tiered rating system, the highest rating being “negligible risk” and the lowest rating being “undetermined risk.” While countries in the “controlled risk” category are eligible under OIE standards to export beef of all ages, both Japan and Korea have made it clear that they will not relax their current import terms for U.S. beef.

Livestock Groups Ask Senators to Stop USDA’s OTM Rule

Over 100 U.S. agricultural groups and livestock auction yards sent a joint letter to senators recently seeking to stop Canadian cattle over thirty months old (OTM) from crossing the border. The USDA is working on a rule to resume imports of older cattle after closing the public comment period last Monday. Last month, R-CALF United Stockgrowers of America asked officials to extend comments in light of Canada’s ninth BSE case in February, but the department refused. R-CALF organized the letter campaign to legislators. “USDA’s proposal is premature and will cause additional and potentially severe consequences for U.S. independent cattle producers,” the letter read. “Congress should intercede to protect the health and safety of the U.S. cattle herd, the safety of the U.S. beef supply and the viability of the U.S. cattle industry.” The letter is signed by small and large groups, including several state cattlemen’s associations. The U.S. shut the border to Canadian cattle after the first Alberta BSE case in May 2003, then reopened it in July 2005 to cattle less than 30 months old, believed at less risk for the disease.

House Ag Chairman Speaks on COOL, Animal ID

At a meeting of the National Farmers Union earlier this month, the chairman of the House Ag Committee, Representative Colin Peterson (D-MN), spoke on the issues of mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) and national animal ID. Peterson said that he wants to delay mandatory COOL implementation by one year, to be effective by September 2008. He said that he considers the implementing regulations written by USDA to be unworkable, and wants them re-written. He also said that he has warned opponents that mandatory COOL “will happen no later” than September of 2008. He added that attempts to repeal the law will result in a floor vote and the law “will pass by 300 votes.” Mandatory COOL will lead to a system of mandatory ID for meat animals, Peterson said. He noted that producer reaction to the announcement of a mandatory ID program led USDA to back off and say the program would be voluntary, but he noted that other developed countries have mandatory ID, and “in the end these (two systems) are going to get married.” His speech came as the Food Marketing Institute released a report claiming that mandatory COOL for seafood has not delivered the benefits promised by the law, and has cost retailers and suppliers much more than USDA originally estimated. (*LMA Infolink, 3/13/07*)

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Does Your HACCP Plan Need An Update? Are You Ready for an FSIS Review?

Register now for “Beyond Basics: HACCP Plan Improvement Workshop for Raw and Cooked Product Operations,” hosted by SMA, NMA, and the Texas A&M University Department of Animal Science, March 29-30, 2007 at Texas A&M University. The registration form and course outline are available on our website. **Sign up today!**

TSC Expands Correlation Program

The role and purpose of the Technical Service Center (TSC) has evolved over the last 10 years. Initially, the TSC, as part of the Office of Field Operations (OFO), provided technical assistance, review of international and domestic establishments, correlation, training, international functions and information technology. Now, as part of the Office of Policy, Program and Employee Development (OPPED), the TSC has begun to address stakeholder issues and improve how it contributes to the agency’s public health mission and provides stakeholder support. A key new role of the TSC is to lead the development of policy and communicate that policy to inspection program personnel, the regulated industry, states and others. In addition, the TSC will actively use the “CAR” methodology whereby it will: **Collect** information with which to identify problems in program implementation, **Assess** the information collected, and **Respond** by identifying and developing solutions to the problems and communicating them to customers. Although correlations previously conducted by the TSC involved simply reiterating policy that had been developed elsewhere in OPPED, the TSC has made a fundamental change in how correlations are conducted. Now, the TSC will lead teams of FSIS personnel responsible for developing policy, and the correlations will be conducted by one or more members of the policy development team. By having the policy development team engaged in articulating the most relevant policy considerations via the correlations, and by having the TSC coordinate them, correlations will be more substantive and informed. Part of implementing the new TSC role is to expand its correlation program to a total of three correlations per week, which will serve OPPED staffs as well as the field and headquarters staff of the other program areas, particularly the OFO district offices. The three weekly correlations will: contribute to the consistent and uniform application and interpretation of regulations and policies for all of OPPED; proactively identify potential questions and concerns with draft issuances just before the documents are issued; and provide OFO district managers with an opportunity, soon after a notice, directive or compliance guideline is issued, to discuss them and ask questions. The three weekly correlations are: the “Pre-Issuances Correlation,” which will present draft directives, notices, and compliance guidelines that have cleared headquarters and are ready to be issued; the “TSC Correlation,” which will present topics such as Q&As on technical issues arising from e-mails or telephone calls, notices and directives, and special topic presentations from groups outside FSIS; and the “District Correlation on New Issuances/Other Policy,” a district correlation on newly issued notices, directives, compliance guidelines, etc., that occurs each week that new issuances are available. For additional information about the TSC and the new correlation program, visit the FSIS website at www.fsis.usda.gov/About_FSIS/Technical_Service_Center/index.asp.

CFIA Launches Media Campaign for New SRM Safeguards

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has launched a communications campaign to raise awareness of new safeguards intended to accelerate the elimination of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) from Canadian cattle. Beginning July 12, 2007 certain cattle tissues capable of transmitting BSE, known as specified risk material (SRM), are being banned from all animal feeds, pet foods and fertilizers. There are new requirements for anyone handling, transporting or disposing of SRM, including: cattle producers; abattoirs; renderers; fertilizer, pet food and feed manufacturers; waste management facilities; and, transporters. Booklets, brochures and posters are being distributed and public notices are appearing in agricultural publications and newspapers across Canada. The CFIA is also hosting technical workshops for regulated parties. A CFIA permit is required for anyone handling, transporting or disposing of SRM, and there are also specific labelling requirements for any products containing prohibited material. With opportunities for BSE spread minimized, Canada hopes to move more quickly toward the eventual eradication of the disease from the national herd. The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) Scientific Commission recently endorsed the recommendation that Canada be categorized as a “controlled risk” country for BSE.

Researchers: Avian Influenza Originated in China

China's southern Guangdong Province is the source of the dangerous H5N1 avian flu virus, according to recently published genetic analysis of the virus. Guangdong also appears to be the source of renewed waves of the H5N1 strain, which has killed or forced the destruction of hundreds of millions of birds, a team at the University of California Irvine reported. "We show that the Chinese province of Guangdong is the source of multiple H5N1 strains spreading at both regional and international scales," the researchers wrote in their report, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "It is probably still originating there and spreading," Walter Fitch, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology who worked on the study, told *Reuters*, "If you can control the virus at its source, you can control it more efficiently," he added. "With a road map of where the strain has migrated, you're more likely to isolate the strain that you should be using to make the vaccine." Since 2003, H5N1 has spread to more than 50 countries as far away from China as Nigeria and Britain. The real fear is that the virus could mutate into a form that people can easily pass from one to another and spark a pandemic. So far it has infected 277 people and killed 167 of them, according to the World Health Organization. The research team looked at samples of the virus taken from across China and as far west as Russia. They also looked at the genetic sequences of virus samples placed in GenBank, a public access database of genetic information. The researchers' maps show China's northwest Qinghai Province to be another source of bird flu's spread, but found that in contrast to China, Indochina - Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam - appeared to absorb strains of the virus. They said H5N1 spreads there but does not spread from there to anywhere else. The study demonstrates why it is important for countries to share samples of the virus from within their borders with the scientific community, the researchers said. (*Reuters, 3/5/07*)

Briefly . . .

FSIS to Hold Public Meeting on Risk-Based Inspection: FSIS will hold a public meeting on Monday, April 2, to discuss the algorithm used to compute risk-based inspection levels for processing establishments. The meeting will be held from 1 - 5 PM at George Mason University, Arlington Campus, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. The agency is also planning to establish an audio conference for participants outside of the Washington, D.C. area. An agenda for the meeting is being finalized and will soon be posted on FSIS' website at www.fsis.usda.gov, along with audio conference information.

FSIS Posts Comments on RBI: To read more about what constituents are saying about risk-based inspection in processing plants, visit FSIS' website at www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/NR_030907_01/index.asp. The Agency has posted the comments of several industry organizations, corporations, and others, including those by SMA President/CEO Dr. Joe Harris.

Beef Economic Research Institute Formed: Earlier this month, two educators representing the beef industry in the United States and Canada, established the North American Institute for Beef Economic Research (NAIBER). NAIBER is a new economic research institute tasked with addressing issues such as: global competitiveness; market structure concerns; changing feed grain markets; international market access; and consumer demand. Ted Schroeder, professor of livestock marketing at Kansas State University, Manhattan and Kurt Klein, of the University of Lethridge, Alberta, Canada, are heading the institute. The organization plans to identify and prioritize research issues, facilitate and conduct research, and provide access to research results and information for the beef industry throughout North America. (*MEATPOULTRY.com, 3/16/07*)

Voluntary Grading Fees Increase for Eggs, Poultry, Rabbits: The USDA recently announced that fees for certain voluntary grading services for eggs, poultry and rabbits will increase effective April 1, 2007. The increases are to cover rising agency costs and salaries of federal and state employees who manage the programs. These grading, certification and audit services are made available upon request and are paid for by the users. The current fees have been in effect since September 25, 2005. For additional information, go to www.ams.usda.gov/poultry/regulations.

Kudos to Kusak: Congratulations to Tyler Kusak for winning his class at the 2007 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. After winning Reserve Champion Simmental Scramble Heifer in the Junior Breeding Beef Scramble and Livestock Judging Contest Heifer Show on Thursday, Tyler's "RTG Miss Gold Shamoo 32S" won Grand Champion Simmental Heifer Calf in the Junior Breeding Beef Heifer Show last weekend. Tyler is the son of Glen and Sherri Kusak of Yoakum Packing Company, and participates in Lavaca County 4-H. Way to go, Tyler!