

# COWABUNGLE

Profits and lobbying sidetrack food supply safety.

by Aria Seligmann



MAD COW MAN, SCULPTURE BY RON HOWELL

**M**ad dogs, Englishmen and baby vampires. Sounds like a bad sci-fi flick, but these and other characters are all part of the drama unfolding in our nation's food supply.

The first case of mad cow disease that is public knowledge in the U.S. was discovered two weeks ago in a downer milk cow in Washington state. Since then, serious questions concerning the USDA's regulations and implementation of those regulations have been raised.

Downer animals are those literally not standing, either due to illness, injury or disease, including but not limited to mad cow disease.

Just this week, tests revealed the Holstein came from a province in Alberta, Canada, where a case of mad cow disease was discovered last spring. Cows from that herd were shipped to a dairy farm in Washington state, and a massive slaughter of other cows from that herd has now begun.

Because the diseased cow was tested in a lab back in Iowa, by the time the results came back, the cow had already gone into the food chain all up and down I-5. The meat couldn't be held for the results to come in as it had to be shipped fresh.

## PRECAUTIONS IGNORED

Mad cow disease or bovine spongiform encephaly (BSE), is caused by a prion, or protein, found in the brains of cattle. Prions cannot be killed off in any sterilization process. If a prion is consumed, it can cause the disease, though symptoms may not show up for years.

A chronic wasting disease similar to scrapie in cattle, BSE causes the brain to break down, literally taking on the appearance of a sponge, and leads to dementia, paralysis and death. The human variation is called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

CJD normally only affects people over the age of 50 and is often confused with Alzheimer's disease. When a group of teenagers in Great Britain came down with CJD in 1996, no one knew what caused it, but one group of researchers suggested the link to BSE.

Previously, researchers had studied the link between scrapie and BSE. Sheep with scrapie are unsalable as human food, so when an outbreak occurred in England in the '90s, farmers began slaughtering them and using them as cattle feed. Cattle are herbivores by nature, and when some contracted BSE, so similar to scrapie, some cried, "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature."

Scientists began researching the link.

According to Eugene molecular biologist Tom Pringle, who has studied mad cow disease and the cattle industry extensively, it takes 1/56 of an ounce of infected meat to become infected.

Although the industry and British government dismissed the idea of the disease coming from tainted feed, the facts couldn't be ignored: More cows became ill with BSE, were slaughtered, chopped up and then fed to other cows, forcing them to be cannibals.

Suddenly, BSE spread rapidly throughout herds, and countries around the world slammed their doors shut in Britains' feed face. But Canada continued, and continues, to import British feed.

The mad cow was born in 1997, which is of some import. During that year, a huge problem occurred in northern Alberta with millions of cattle exposed to contaminated feed. After that, very few countries would accept Canadian beef, but the U.S. continued to import it, accepting 80 percent, or 1.7 mil-

lion live cattle per year to American farms. In 2001 alone, 57,000 live dairy cattle replacers were brought in.

Through the research shared by Pringle and others (see [www.mad-cow.org](http://www.mad-cow.org)), recommendations have been made to the cattle industry and to governments throughout the world concerning the best way to protect cattle — and humans — from the illness. But the U.S. government, under pressure from a powerful meat lobby, has been negligent in implementing those recommendations,

which include testing.

Tests for BSE are now both accurate and inexpensive. "Testing would add only 3 cents per pound for beef," says Pringle, adding that not running those tests makes little sense. Meanwhile, in Asia and in Europe, where mad cow has been found (in the U.K.), tests on cattle are routinely performed. In Japan, every cow is tested, in results that are conclusive in cows as young as 23 months.

## DOWNERS REJECTED

In the U.S., the FDA has banned the practice of using cattle as feed for other cattle. But in both 2000 and 2002, at the request of Congressman Richard Durbin (D-Ill.), the General Accounting Office found serious lapses in U.S. companies following that regulation, and until then, there had been no enforcement of those regulations.

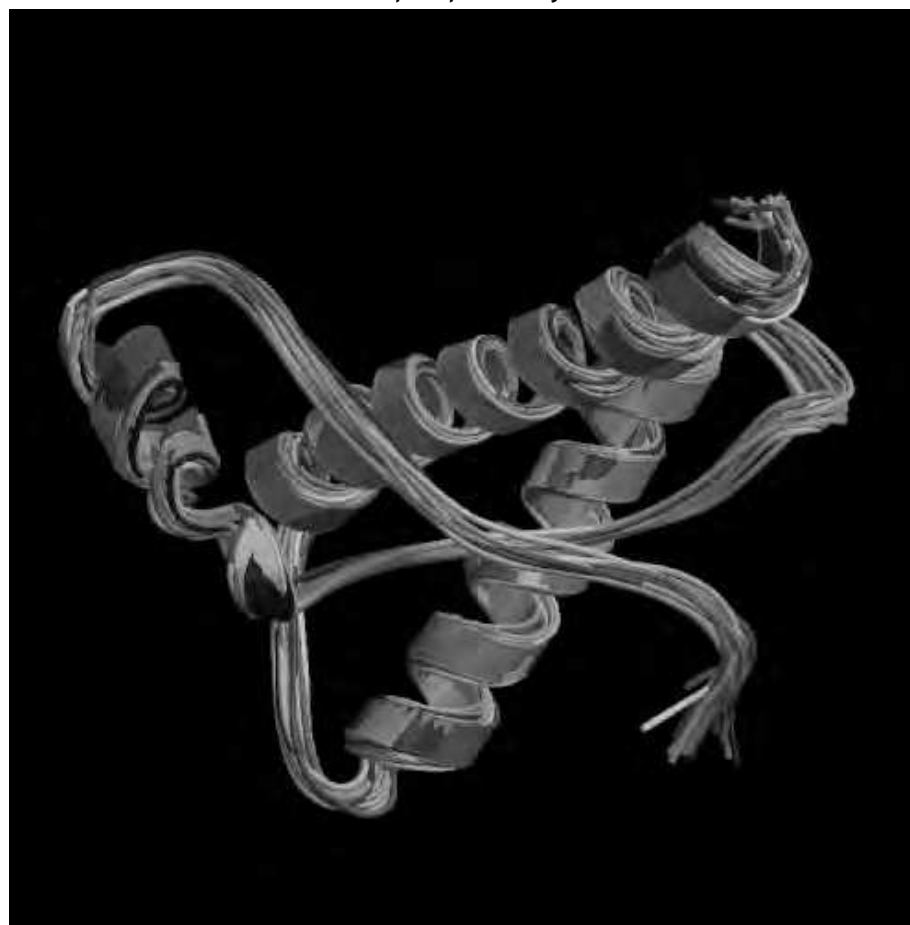
That's not a huge surprise if you follow the money. Using downer cattle as feed saves a lot of money, and in 2000, the livestock industry contributed \$3.7 million to Republican campaigns.

Until just last week, there had been no U.S. law prohibiting the sale of downer cattle for human consumption. The USDA banned the sale of such meat to the public school lunch program several years ago, but it was still allowed onto grocery store shelves.

"It's as if we're a starving, third-world country, feeding ourselves the lowest quality food," says Pringle.

The Dec. 30 ban on the sale of downers was announced by Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman as a move to restore public confidence in the nation's meat supply. This was a big turnaround for the Bush administration, which had blocked, along with meat industry lobbyists, an identical measure in Congress only weeks before. In fact, for the past 12 years, the meat industry

Bovine prion protein fragment



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