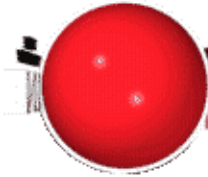


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Wed, March 15, 2006

U.S. plans to reduce mad cow testing

By AP

WASHINGTON -- Despite the confirmation of a third case of mad cow disease in the U.S., the American government intends to scale back testing for the brain-wasting disorder blamed for the deaths of more than 150 people in Europe.

The U.S. Agriculture Department boosted its surveillance after finding the first case of mad cow disease in the U.S. in 2003.

About 1,000 tests are run daily, up from about 55 daily in 2003.

The testing program detected an infected cow in Alabama last week and further analysis confirmed Monday the animal had mad cow disease.

Still, a reduction in testing has been in the works for months. The department's chief veterinarian, John Clifford, mentioned it when he announced the new case of mad cow disease.

"As we approach the conclusion of our enhanced surveillance program, let me offer a few thoughts," Clifford said, explaining the U.S. will follow international standards for testing.

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns pointed out testing is not a food safety measure. Rather, it's a way to find out the prevalence of the disease.

"Keep in mind the testing was for surveillance," Johanns said.

"It was to get an idea of the condition of the herd."

Higher testing levels were intended to be temporary when they were announced two years ago.

Yet consumer groups argue more animals should be tested, not fewer.

Officials haven't finalized new levels but the department's budget proposal calls for 40,000 tests annually, or about 110 daily.

"This would be a tenth of a percent of all animals slaughtered," Jean Halloran, director of food policy initiatives at Consumers Union, said yesterday. "This starts to be so small that in our opinion, it approaches a policy of don't look, don't find."

Iowa Senator Tom Harkin said the confidence of U.S. consumers and foreign customers is at risk if testing is reduced.

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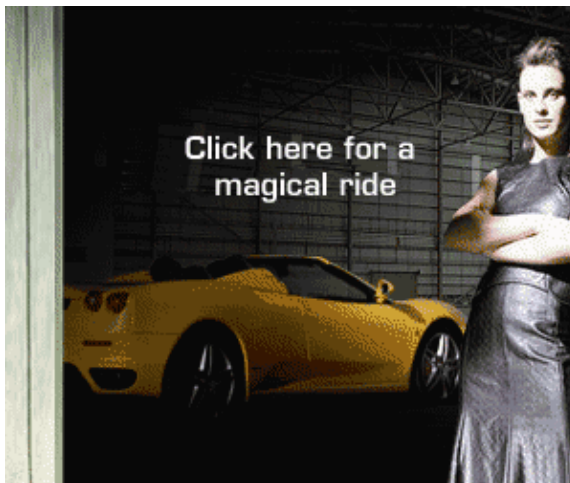
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