

Wednesday 24 February 2010

PR/031/10

Australian beef is safe

The NSW Farmers' Association is calling on the Federal Government to reassure consumers that Australian beef consumption is safe.

NSW Farmers' Association Cattle Committee Chair Richard Chamen says the industry is concerned by recent incorrect media reports that beef from countries with a previous case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) will not be subject to import risk assessment following a change in trading arrangements.

"Australian beef is some of the safest in the world, and these reports are incorrect," he said.

The Federal Government has announced a move from a ban on countries that have had an outbreak of BSE, commonly known as Mad Cow Disease, such as the UK, European countries, Japan, Canada and the US, to one of scientific risk assessment.

"The Association is working with Cattle Council Australia to ensure that Australian domestic markets maintain the highest level of assurance that no BSE affected beef can get into Australia," Mr Chamen said.

Changes to be introduced on 1 March 2010 will utilise the World Organisation for Animal Health risk assessment methodology to undertake a risk assessment to determine whether beef and beef products from a country represent a risk to the health of Australian consumers.

The policy will allow beef to be imported from 'Negligible BSE risk' or 'Controlled BSE risk' countries provided that such countries can meet strict assessment criteria to prevent any risk to Australian consumers.

"Australia's previous BSE policy could have led to retaliatory action by countries which also imported our beef. Given that 65% of our product is exported and trade barriers are a regular imposition on Australia's beef exports, this concern was a very real possibility.

"As a nation we have strongly supported international trading rules being science-based, particularly when arguing for greater beef access into regions such as the EU and SE Asia, and the previous zero risk policy made it difficult to justify our stance when BSE science has progressed significantly since the policy was implemented in 2001.

"What we require as producers is that all beef imported has been subjected to the same criteria that Australian beef is subject to, that there is the same traceability as in Australia and that Australian consumers get the safest food in the world. Anything less is not acceptable.

"We are very keen to see the Government spend some time reassuring and informing the public that beef consumed in Australia is safe, and our systems keep it so," Mr Chamen concluded.

Contact: Ellen McNamara (Media Officer) 0429 990 218

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