



## NEWS RELEASE

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### OLDER CATTLE TO ENTER FOOD CHAIN SUBJECT TO SAFEGUARDS

Advice from the Food Standards Agency (FSA) that Defra's proposed robust BSE testing system for older cattle should replace the Over Thirty Months (OTM) rule, was accepted today by the Government.

New legislation to replace the OTM rule by BSE testing can now be introduced. However, not all restrictions on the slaughter of British cattle will be lifted.

The OTM rule currently imposes an automatic ban on all older cattle from entering the human food chain. The new system will allow UK cattle born after 31 July 1996 to be slaughtered and sold for human consumption.

However, older UK cattle born before 1 August 1996 will continue to be excluded from the food chain and there will be a new legal offence of sending cattle born before August 1996 to abattoirs producing meat for human consumption.

Abattoirs wanting to slaughter OTM cattle must meet strict standards endorsed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the Independent Group set up to advise the Agency. These include a two day trial and entering into a legally binding agreement with the Meat Hygiene Service on operational procedures.

The main public health protection measure - the removal of specified risk material (SRM) - which is estimated to remove over 99% of infectivity in cattle - will continue to be rigorously enforced by the Meat Hygiene Service. Only OTM cattle that receive a negative test result for BSE under the new system will be sold for human consumption.

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett said:

"Protection of public health remains the Government's priority. It is imperative that abattoirs and cutting plants that decide to process beef from older cattle operate tight controls and follow all agreed procedures. Defra

will be working closely with the Meat Hygiene Service to ensure that the testing system is applied rigorously.

It is excellent news that we will soon be able to increase our supplies of home-produced beef.

We will also be working in Brussels to ensure that beef from UK cattle born on or after 1 August 1996 can be exported as soon as possible".

The new testing system is expected to replace the OTM rule on 7 November 2005. Changes in export restrictions are not expected to come into effect before early 2006.

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### Notes for editors

1. In July 2004, the FSA advised Ministers that a move to replace the Over Thirty Months (OTM) rule by BSE testing would be justified on the basis of the food-borne risk to consumers and proportionality in relation to the cost of maintaining the current rule. The Agency further advised that, given the importance of the effective implementation of BSE testing, Ministers should not change the OTM rule until an independent group had advised that all the necessary arrangements for testing have been put in place. Much uncertainty still surrounds the science of BSE and vCJD. However, the FSA risk assessment was based on pessimistic assumptions and has been subject to rigorous independent peer review. It was endorsed by the Government's scientific advisors on BSE (the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee).

2. In December 2004, the UK Government announced the start of a managed transition towards the lifting of the OTM rule and its replacement with a system of robust testing of cattle for BSE. The Government also announced that the final switch-over would not happen until the FSA had advised that the testing system was robust.

3. On 15 August 2005, the Food Standards Agency Board advised Ministers that an effective system to test cattle aged over 30 months (OTM) for BSE before they enter the food chain had been successfully designed and trialled. The Board took into account (a) the report from their independent group to advise on the proposed testing regime; (b) feedback from the European Union's Food and Veterinary Office inspection in June of the UK's BSE controls; and (c) the outcome of public consultations.

4. The Board also identified a number of prerequisites which would need to be met prior to OTM rule change. These addressed the need to ensure sufficient abattoir capacity and appropriate supervision by the Meat Hygiene Service as BSE testing commenced; the issuing of new guidance about the

rules on emergency slaughter of animals; and the strengthening of legislation to prevent over age animals entering the food chain. These are all being taken forward.

5. Brain samples will be taken from cattle after slaughter and sent by abattoirs to an LGC laboratory in Great Britain (at Runcorn, Teddington or Edinburgh) or to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs laboratory in Northern Ireland. Results can be available early on the day after slaughter. All those cattle that will become eligible for human consumption following rule change are already being tested after slaughter under the Over Thirty Months Scheme.

6. The terms of reference of the FSA's independent group were 'to make recommendations to the Food Standards Agency on a robust regimen. In so doing, to agree: (a) the components of a robust, reliable and effective regimen for BSE testing of OTM cattle slaughtered for human consumption; and (b) the approach to assessing the performance of the testing regimen; to then review those recommendations in light of a trial of the testing system, and to report to the Food Standards Agency'. Members of the group were: Professor Patrick Wall (Chairman); Sue Dibb; Peter Jinman; Professor Peter Lind; Mrs Barbara Saunders; and Dr Geoff Spriegel.

7. In line with the risk assessment, when the OTM rule is replaced for domestic production, it will also cease to apply to imported beef from cattle of all ages.

8. For cattle born before 1 August 1996, Defra are discussing with the Commission a voluntary compensation scheme (the Older Cattle Disposal Scheme (OCDS)) which is expected to run for three years and will succeed the current Over Thirty Months Scheme (OTMS). Until then the OTMS will remain in place. Only cattle born before August 1996 will be eligible for the OCDS which is not expected to come into force until late December at the earliest.

9. The UK will need a specific proposal from the European Commission and the agreement of the other EU member states before it can export beef from cattle born after July 1996 on the same basis as the rest of the EU. The Commission are unlikely to make a proposal before November.

10. BSE was first identified in the UK in 1986. More than 183,000 cases have been confirmed in the UK to date, of which more than 95% were detected before 2000. The epidemic peaked at an annual total of more than 37,000 clinical cases in 1992 and the number of new clinical cases is currently at the lowest level since recording began. There were 90 clinical and 253 cases detected through testing in 2004, the vast majority in cattle born before August 1996. The UK's reinforced feed controls which banned mammalian meat and bone meal from feed for all farmed livestock, effective from 1 August 1996, have led to a particularly sharp fall in BSE cases in cattle born after July 1996.

11. This decision has been made by the UK Government, the Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly Government.

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