

Opinion on the scientific basis for import bans proposed by Austria with regard to BSE risks in Germany and France adopted by the Scientific Steering Committee at its meeting of 29-30 March 2001

1. INTRODUCTION

The Austrian authorities provided on 28 December 2000, a scientific justification for banning imports of live bovines and bovine products from Germany. The main justification is that these imports from Germany could result in an "additional external challenge" for the Austrian cattle system. This would be against the GBR decreasing policy that the Austrian government is pursuing by both increasing stability and reducing external challenge.

On 22 January 2001, they provided an additional scientific justification for the import ban against France. It focuses on the "internal challenge" in France since 1996, arguing that the SSC underestimated it.

2. OPINION

The SSC considers that the opinion previously expressed on the scientific basis for trade restrictions proposed by Austria with regard to France also applies to the present case. With regard to the additional scientific justification the SSC wants to point out that no such imports were recorded by the French authorities, according to their dossier provided to the Commission services in 1998/99 for the assessment of their GBR. If the French Ministry of Agriculture did refer to illegal imports it is clear that such imports could not have been taken into account when assessing the GBR of France. However, such imports would not significantly have modified the GBR level of France. It should also be noted that similar, unrecorded imports from BSE affected neighbouring countries are likely to be experienced by all countries in such situation.

It also agrees that the cattle imports from UK to France in 1993-1995 could represent a high external challenge. However, the French authorities confirmed previously that these were exclusively calves for veal-production. However, it retains its assessment that the infection risk for French cattle decreased after 1996, mainly because of the exclusion of SRM and fallen stock from rendering that was implemented in France in that year.

As far as embryos and semen are concerned, the SSC reiterates its position that there is no scientific justification to assume a risk from imports of bovine semen, embryos and ova from any country, provided the recommendations made in the SSC opinion of March 1999 are respected.

As far as to the recent reported incidence of BSE in Germany and its evolution, it is ascribed by the SSC to 3 factors :

- Real increase in incidence as predicted in its opinion on geographical BSE risk;
- Recently introduced tests on identifying cases that would not have detected previously;
- The improved passive surveillance.

The domestic prevalence in Germany (source : report on assessment of GBR of Germany, July 2000) results from the following factors :

- During the 80s and early 90s a very unstable German BSE/cattle system was exposed to increasing external challenges, particularly between 1988 and 1993.
- A significant challenge resulted from importation of over 13000 cattle and more than 1000 tons of MBM from the UK during the period when the UK epidemic probably peaked. Imports of cattle and MBM (2000-17000 tons p.a.) from other countries affected by BSE added to this external challenge, which increased to very high levels between 1988 and 1993. Import of potentially contaminated MBM via other EU-countries, e.g. included in imported feedstuffs, cannot reliably be estimated.
- Introduction of the BSE-agent during this period and its subsequent amplification and propagation is most likely.
- After 1994 the risk of amplification and propagation of the BSE-agent started to decline and since 1996 the

anticipated amount of circulating BSE-infectivity is considered to be constant.

- The BSE infectivity that was most likely introduced in the very unstable system is assumed to have led to an internal challenge that was amplified until the system became neutrally stable in 1996."

The overall challenge in Germany (source: report on assessment of GBR of Germany, July 2000) is determined as follows:

- It is assumed from the interaction of the significant external challenge and the very low stability that an internal challenge developed from 1990 onwards, at least partly balancing the reduction of the external challenge after 1993.
- Therefore the overall challenge remained at very high levels after the external challenges decreased. Since 1996 it is constant, when the system became neutrally stable.
- With the improved rendering (June 2000) and the exclusion of SRM (Oct. 2000) the system in Germany is now stable.

The SSC underlines that the current incidence figures do not require modification of the GBR level of Germany or France as assessed in its GBR-opinion of July 2000. However, this position will be reviewed regularly in the light of the results of the intensified surveillance.

In the above mentioned documents, the Austrian competent Authority states, among other things, that with a view to ensuring optimal stability against BSE, Austria is strictly complying with the ban on feed and on the use of specific risk materials. Moreover, the rendering plants in Austria are meeting optimal conditions (i.e. 133°C/20 min/3bar).

Therefore, under such optimal conditions of stability as declared by Austria (GBR level II), no additional challenge would build up in the Austrian BSE/Cattle system as a consequence of additional infectivity deriving from imports of cattle or MBM from Germany and France (GBR level III) and no additional measures should be needed with regard to international trade because there is no risk that the agent could enter the Austrian BSE/cattle system.

Moreover, in deciding upon appropriate measures, the possibility should have been considered of slaughtering also cattle imported from Germany before reaching an age at which the animals could harbour significant levels of infectivity, as already foreseen by Austria for cattle imported from France.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the SSC at this stage does not consider the justification provided so far by Austria as substantial enough to support the assumption that the risk for Austrian consumers to be exposed to the BSE agent would significantly increase due to imports of live cattle from Germany or France.

As regards to the risk for Austrian cattle to be exposed to the BSE-agent, no increase has to be expected as long as the system is as optimally stable as claimed by the Austrian Authorities. An optimally stable system would prevent the agent from reaching domestic cattle.