



# USDA'S BSE TESTING PROGRAM

## Protecting America's Herd The man who had the BSE cow tells his story

Veterinarian and dairy farmer, Bill Wavrin, 43, remembers well the day he learned that one of his cows was the first cow in the United States to test positive for BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease).

"The excruciating part was not knowing how it was going to go," said Wavrin from his home in Washington State's Yakima Valley. "That stretch where we didn't know how many cows we would lose and what it would cost us was tough."

When it was over, though, not only had Wavrin been indemnified for his losses, but he also had only positive things to say about the way he had been treated. "Our State and Federal agencies charged with protecting our herds (and our customers) are able and committed," he said. "They wanted to make sure that we were treated fairly." That's quite a compliment from somebody who had to have help from law enforcement to remove the reporters from his lawn.

Wavrin remembered that, "There were literally miles of video vans and trucks with satellite dishes along the road to our house. That's not the kind of attention a farmer craves."

The Yakima Valley is an oasis of irrigated green in an otherwise arid landscape in the rain shadow of the Cascade Mountains to the west. Wavrin, his brother, Sid, and their mother, Donna, produce feed on 2,500 acres of the valley to feed the 3,200 cows they milk. On top

of that, Wavrin has his large-animal veterinary practice. Long hours are the order of the day, every day.

Three hours after Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman's announcement that a cow had tested positive for BSE, the phone began to ring at Wavrin's home. Those long hours were about to get longer.

"A USDA rep and the State Vet came that night. They wanted to know where that cow came from," Wavrin recalled.

Later, the Food and Drug Administration would also become involved. They came to check on feeding practices and to verify that the 1997 feed ban had been honored. It had.

Inventories were checked and then a quarantine was enforced. The different agencies cooperated, and each seemed concerned about making sure the Wavrins were involved. "There were so many parts of the whole thing that were comforting," he said.

For Wavrin, there was never any question about cooperating. "Like most producers, I am very proud of the quality and safety of the food we produce." He is also a strong supporter of the current USDA BSE Testing Program. "In light of these events, I find it reasonable for my customers to request this burden of proof," he said, adding, "Anything we learn will benefit both of us."

As a veterinarian, Wavrin understands the ramifications of the BSE Testing

Program better than most. "If it is present, we need to know. I don't think it pays to hide from this," he said. "Suspect animals need to be tested."

When Dr. Wavrin talks about "suspect animals," he means those that are dead, down, or disoriented. USDA reports that the most scientifically reliable way to chase down any possible trace of BSE is to test older cattle that fall into those three categories.

The success of the testing program depends, in part, on producers calling the toll-free number to report those animals so they can be tested. That number is 1-866-536-7593. The costs involved with sampling the animal will be covered by USDA.

USDA understands that reassuring consumers and our trading partners and protecting America's herd are vitally important.

"We must all participate for this program to be effective," said Wavrin.

At the edge of the Yakima Valley, the deep green of the irrigated fields suddenly gives way to the browns and tans of the sagebrush that covers the slopes of the surrounding hills. On the Wavrin farm, the schedule has returned to the normal long hours. Meanwhile, USDA scientists are counting on producers to make the calls that will help protect America's herd.



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