

BSE in the U.S: What do you do if a reporter calls you?

Identification of a dairy cow in the U.S. with BSE is old news, but the livestock industry will be dealing with the inevitable publicity for quite awhile. Included in this issue as an insert is some helpful information from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) on BSE. Also, please call Bill Wailes, CSU Extension Dairy Specialist, and Frank Garry, Integrated Livestock Management Coordinator, if you have further questions.

Because you own cattle, there is a good possibility that you may be contacted by the media to comment on any aspect that evolves out of the continuing BSE story. It can be very difficult to make your position known clearly. How should producers work with reporters to ensure that accurate and positive information reaches consumers? Below are five basic guidelines for talking to the media that apply at anytime but are particularly helpful when discussing a "hot" topic like BSE. This information is provided by the NCBA.

1. Screen media calls: Ask who the reporter is, who they work for, what they want to talk about, when the story deadline is, and when you can call them back. You don't have to talk with reporters the moment they call. They generally understand that you will need to call them back because you are busy, but they do have deadlines and will expect you to get back with them quickly. Use the time before the call back to organize your thoughts, get answers you need, and line up talking points. If you don't feel comfortable talking with them, refer them to your state or national organization. If you do an interview, let your state organization know .

2. Focus on your message: Select three main points you want to get across and repeat them throughout the interview. Try to maintain control of the direction of the interview by returning to your main message. Use the basic technique of briefly answering the reporter's question, even if the answer is a simple "yes" or "no", and then bridge to one of your prepared messages.

3. Never speculate: Focus on the facts and don't allow reporters to lead you into speculation, conjecture, or places where you don't want to go. It is perfectly acceptable to tell a reporter "I don't know the answer to that, but I will find out and get back to you." Then do get the reporter's contact information and do get back to him or her as soon as possible.

4. Take advantage of the experts: Direct reporters to places they can find reliable information (your local cattle or beef association, NCBA and the Web site at www.bseinfo.org, or the USDA site at www.usda.gov .)

5. Be positive: You can set the tone of the article by your attitude. Avoid repeating negative language and look for ways to bridge the discussion to positive messages like: "The U.S. has the safest beef in the world."

For further information contact NCBA in Centennial, Co at 303-694-0305 or in Washington, DC at 202-347-0228.