US has 'triple firewall' against BSE, says NCBA leader

By Betsy Freese

In light of news that bovine spongiform encephalopathy has been confirmed in a cow in Canada, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) held a press conference today where an official with the organization tried to allay fears among US producers and consumers.

"USDA is taking swift action," said Terry Stokes, NCBA CEO. "Keep in mind that it is one case of BSE in one cow in one herd in Alberta. There has been no occurrence of BSE in the US."

He pointed out that the US has, what he called "a triple fire wall system" in place.

1. Since 1989 we have banned importation of live animals from countries with BSE.

2. Since 1990 we have had a surveillance system in place for BSE.

3. Since 1997 we have banned the use of feed supplements of meat and bone meal from cattle and other animals.

"It is extremely unlikely that BSE will become established in the US," he said. "We applaud the Canadians in the way they are handling the incident in a responsible way."

Stokes also noted that between January 1 and May 3, there have been 94,337 live cattle imported from Canada into the US. Canada, Australia and New Zealand are the top three importers of beef to the US, and a major portion of that goes into food service. Most of the retail beef from those countries is solid muscle cuts. One-third of the beef imported into the US comes from Canada.

Stokes shared the following information as well:

- The parentage or breed of the infected cow is not known.

- It was a beef herd, not a dairy herd.

- The cow was 8 years old.

- In 2002 there were 1.075 million live cattle imported from Canada into the US, and 1 billion pounds of processed beef.
Stokes said he thinks consumers will remain confident in the beef supply in the US and demand will continue to be strong. "There is concern for the global beef industry as far as beef demand," he said.

US government officials were in flight to Canada this afternoon to help with the investigation.

"We are encouraging the Canadians to move in an expedient manner. They are our neighbors and deserve to get all the help we can give them. Secretary Veneman is on the phone constantly today with their officials," Stokes said.