

## Consumers Union asks feds to retest suspect mad cow after crucial test omitted

*USDA urged to follow internationally recognized procedures*

WASHINGTON, DC. -- Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports*, today asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture to retest a cow suspected in November 2004 of having mad cow disease, using a critical, internationally recognized test that the agency failed to use. The test, called the “Western blot,” is used by authorities in Japan and Europe when making a final determination as to whether a suspect cow has the fatal brain-wasting affliction, which can be passed on to humans.

A Consumers Union delegation met earlier this month with USDA officials and today issued a letter to USDA Secretary Mike Johanns urging the agency to revise its testing methods. CU is asking the agency to retest the November cow using the Western blot and to send samples from the cow to the United Kingdom for an independent evaluation.

“Given the potential consequences to both public health and the cattle industry if this brain-wasting disease were to become established here, it is extremely important that every scientifically justifiable step be taken to prevent it,” said the letter signed by Michael Hansen, PhD., a biologist with Consumers Union and spokesperson for its [www.NotinMyFood.org](http://www.NotinMyFood.org) campaign and Jean Halloran, director of CU’s Consumer Policy Institute.

The USDA limited its confirmatory testing in November 2004 to the immunohistochemistry (IHC) test, which it describes as the “gold standard.” The result of the IHC test was negative. USDA did not perform the Western blot test, even though it had previously used both IHC and the Western blot test in confirming the first U.S. case of mad cow disease, from Washington State in December, 2003. The USDA also sent material from the 2003 Washington State cow to the United Kingdom for further review of its results. Scientists in Japan and Belgium have reported that suspect cows may be negative on the IHC and still register as positive on the Western blot. Such cows are universally regarded as infected.

“The IHC test is more subjective than the Western blot test, relying on the judgment of a skilled scientist is assessing the appearance of thin slices of brain material under a microscope,” Hansen said. “The Western blot test is more objective, with results that can be read by any technician.” In the U.S., the IHC test is performed by a USDA scientist at a USDA laboratory in Ames, Iowa.

The cow USDA assessed in November 2004 had come up as “suspect” for mad cow disease in two runs of the Biorad “quick test.” The Biorad test has been used to screen over 200,000 cows for mad cow disease since USDA began a new testing initiative in July 2004. However, all international authorities agree that the Biorad screening test can give a false positive result. Thus it must be confirmed by other tests. CU urges USDA to use both Western blot and IHC for confirmation.

“The USDA should operate out of an “abundance of caution” in its efforts to keep the U.S. food supply safe from (mad cow disease),” the letter to Johanns stated. The experience of the United Kingdom, where millions of cattle have been destroyed, beef exports blocked for many years and 147 people have died, painfully demonstrates the consequences of insufficient action to prevent the spread of mad cow disease.”