

Mad cow alarm raised over European beef imports to Australia

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Fears over mad cow disease still exist. (AP Pic Delmi Alvarez) *Source:* Supplied

A MAD cow expert has raised the alarm over beef imports from Europe, urging Australia not to "lower its guard" against the brain-wasting disease.

Neurology professor Colin Masters, executive director of the Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, has warned that some British cattle are still contracting mad cow disease.

People who eat beef contaminated with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) risk dying from a human variant of the brain-wasting illness.

"There still are a few animals detected in the UK with BSE," he told News Limited yesterday.

"The question is: where are they getting it from?"

"I do think they've got it largely under control but we're not completely sure it's 100 per cent safe.

"We don't want to lower our guard."

Australia has never had a case of BSE, but has lifted its blanket ban on beef imports from countries with a history of mad cow disease.

Professor Masters - an eminent scientist who has advised both the Australian and British governments on mad cow disease - told a Senate inquiry into beef imports that Europe's horsemeat contamination scandal exposes a "weak link" in certifying imports.



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"To a large extent, we are dependent on certifications from countries of origin that their exports (and our imports) are BSE-free," his submission states.

"But this appears to be the weak link in the chain, as illustrated recently with the widespread mislabelling of horse meat product in Europe.

"The technical difficulty in detecting BSE prions makes complete assurance of freedom of contamination very challenging.

"It would be prudent to adopt a very conservative approach when it comes to importing beef products from countries associated with endemic BSE."

Professor Masters chaired the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) committee of experts on Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies, which include "mad cow" disease, until its closure last year.

He also advised the British government from 2000-2003, in the wake of the BSE emergency which destroyed a third of Britain's cattle herd.

The cattle contracted BSE by eating food made from the rendered remains of cows.

Professor Masters said Australia had pioneered the cannibalistic feed practice in the 1950s, as the protein-rich meal made calves grow faster.

Australian farmers found the meal too expensive compared to grain and grass - but Europeans embraced it for their intensive farming.

The practice has since been banned in Australia and Europe.

"We don't feed cattle to cattle or sheep to sheep," Professor Masters said.

But he said Australian farmers could feed dead pig to pigs, which cannot be infected with the same prions that cause BSE in cattle or scrapie in sheep.

"It is still possible to have a sick pig go into the rendering process and be fed back to other pigs," he said.

"We call it industrial cannibalism.

"The argument is there's no risk (with pigs) ... but clearly it's something I'd want to keep an eye on."

The Senate inquiry was called after News Ltd revealed in February that Australia had reopened the door to beef imports from Europe.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand ruled that consumers have a "negligible" risk of catching the BSE from Croatian or Dutch beef.

But the Europeans are still waiting for the federal Agriculture Department to issue import certificates.

New Zealand and Vanuatu - both BSE-free - have been the only countries allowed to sell beef in Australia since the 2001 ban