

Torres: Mandatory animal identification system needed

by Roger Segelken, Cornell News Service

If all cattle in the United States carried identification, tracking of herds exposed to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or "mad cow" disease) or other animal diseases would be easier and faster, according to a Cornell animal-disease and public-policy expert.

Alfonso Torres, executive director of the New York State Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine, made the suggestion during his testimony Jan. 27 on BSE before the U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee.

Torres recommended "... that Congress in collaboration with the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] needs to make this national animal ID system a mandatory program." He also described two other measures to help relieve the trade embargoes imposed on the United States because of mad cow disease: a more equivalent and proportional trade policy, based on the degree of BSE risks with trade partners; and stepped-up enforcement of bans on the use of certain high-risk materials (such as brains, spinal cords and intestines)

from non-ambulatory cattle or any cattle over 30 months of age. He noted that the BSE agent (the misfolded proteins, called prions) is known to accumulate in those tissues of infected cattle. "These materials should not enter the human food chain or the animal feed chain," Torres stated.

At Cornell, Torres also serves as the associate dean of veterinary public policy. He is a former chief veterinary officer of the USDA and former director of the Plum Island Animal Disease Center.

Torres said during the Senate committee hearing: "While I recognize and appreciate the many efforts of the USDA and the animal industries in developing and implementing a national animal ID system, the weakness is that such a system is a voluntary effort at this time."

The hearing to discuss food safety, livestock marketing and international trade was called as a result of the discovery last December of a BSE-infected dairy cow in Washington state. If a uni-



Torres

versal identification system had been in place last year, Torres suggested, American and Canadian officials could more readily have traced the diseased animal and others in its herd.

Torres commended the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration for what he called effective actions following the BSE finding in December, adding: "These actions have maintained consumer confidence in our beef products. While the trade embargoes were to be expected in a situation like this, I hope that, with the implementation of further actions as suggested, we would continue to enhance the defense of our nation against BSE and sustain domestic and international confidence in our animal industries and the safety of our food and feed supply."

The full text of the Torres testimony is at the veterinary college Web site: <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/publicresources/pr-torresTestimony.htm>.

Also testifying at the Senate hearing, which was chaired by Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), were USDA Secretary Ann M. Veneman and U.S. Food and Drug Administration Deputy Commissioner Lester M. Crawford.

Photo: U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee