

## Questions and answers on Australia's imports of beef

**Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

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On 1 March 2010, the Australian Government implemented a new policy for beef imports. The new policy allows all countries, including those which have experienced cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) to apply to export beef to Australia.

### **Why change import conditions? Isn't our health at risk?**

No. Australia's human health authorities have clearly stated that food safety standards are unchanged by this new policy.

The policy change has been made because the science has moved on since 2001. We now know there is no scientific justification for a blanket ban on beef imports based on whether a country had reported cases of BSE — providing acceptable BSE control programs are in place.

The latest Australian review on the current science and control measures for BSE in support of Australia's new policy can be found at the [Department of Health and Ageing](#) website.

### **Is Australia importing beef or cattle from the United States?**

No. Australia does not allow the importation of United States (US) cattle or US beef.

Countries that apply to export beef to Australia must undergo a rigorous food safety risk assessment by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and an animal health risk analysis by Biosecurity Australia.

The new import conditions will require exporting countries — irrespective of whether a country has reported BSE — to demonstrate they have acceptable controls in place and that those controls are monitored. This includes controls on food safety, animal health, traceability, surveillance, and feeding and slaughter practices.

Both FSANZ and Biosecurity Australia will conduct in-country inspections to assess these controls.

### **What about reports that US beef and cattle are coming in?**

There are reports of data that appear to show that US beef and cattle have been coming to Australia since 2003 — but this information is simply not correct.

We know this because beef and cattle can only legally enter Australia under a valid import permit that is issued by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS).

AQIS has not issued any import permits for US cattle since 2003 and for US beef from cattle slaughtered after December 2003.

## **How can you be sure about your data?**

Our records are backed up by Australia's official import statistics, maintained by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. There is no evidence of imports of beef from US cattle or live US cattle into Australia as claimed in those reports.

A United States government representative has publically confirmed that the reported imports did not occur.

## **Where does the fresh beef come from that's in our supermarkets and butcher shops?**

Most fresh beef sold in Australia is meat from Australian cattle. A small amount of fresh beef comes from New Zealand and Vanuatu. These are the only two countries that currently export fresh beef meat to Australia. That is because they meet Australia's food safety and animal quarantine requirements.

Other countries may be able to meet these requirements in the future.

## **Do we import any processed beef?**

Yes. Imported canned products that contain heat-treated beef are available in Australian supermarkets. This beef must be sourced from cattle raised and slaughtered in countries that have been approved by FSANZ. The US is not one of those approved countries at this time, but is currently undergoing an assessment by FSANZ.

However, for many years US companies have processed beef, from countries approved by FSANZ, into canned products for export to Australia.

## **How do you know that beef products labelled "product of USA" do not contain beef from the USA?**

All canned and similar products, such as meals in microwaveable bowls that contain beef must be imported under a valid import permit issued by AQIS.

Import permits issued by AQIS for US exports of canned products containing beef require that the beef must only be sourced from cattle raised and slaughtered in countries approved by FSANZ.

The US is not one of those approved countries at this time.

The country of origin where the cattle were raised and slaughtered to produce the beef in these products is identifiable at import into Australia through the official government documentation issued by the exporting country. These arrangements have been in place for many years.

Australia has confidence in the official systems in the US that underpin its certification and inspection system.

Australia has accepted beef from Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay to be used in US manufacture of canned beef products. The canning (retorting) process addresses other animal diseases of quarantine concern including foot and mouth disease.

Recently Australian and US government authorities traced the origin of beef in a canned product from the US. The exercise demonstrated that the origin of the beef could be traced with confidence through the whole system.

### **How is it labelled? Who checks the labelling?**

Canned product coming from the US is labelled 'Product of USA'. Australia requires that the country of origin is clearly marked on labels of domestic and imported packaged processed foods. This is a requirement under the Food Standards Code developed by FSANZ.

Labels are monitored for compliance with Australian food standards by AQIS at the border and by state and territory food safety authorities within Australia.

### **Are imports tested at the border for BSE?**

No. There is no test available for the BSE agent in live cattle, beef or processed beef products. Instead, countries rely upon official government documents about the origin of the beef.

### **What about other food safety tests?**

FSANZ is responsible for developing and maintaining the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code which applies to all food whether imported or produced here. FSANZ provides advice to AQIS on monitoring and testing of imported food.

AQIS operates a risk based inspection scheme at the border to assess imported food against Australia's food standards. AQIS monitors consignments of fresh beef and processed beef products for compliance with labelling standards and suitability of the product for human consumption. Samples may also be taken for testing.

Ready-to-eat processed beef products are subject to testing for the presence of micro-organisms including *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and *Staphylococcus*.

AQIS also monitors consignments of fresh beef from New Zealand and Vanuatu at the border for the presence of agricultural chemicals including some organophosphates, organochlorines, synthetic pyrethroids and fungicides.

### **When will beef meat from the US start coming to Australia? What about beef from other countries?**

There are two separate approval processes. No new trade in fresh beef will commence from a country under the new arrangements until:

- FSANZ has completed its BSE food safety risk assessment of that country and
- Biosecurity Australia has completed an import risk analysis to assess animal health issues.

Further information on these processes is available from the websites of [Food Standards Australia New Zealand](#) and [Biosecurity Australia](#).

## Which countries have applied to export beef to Australia?

Canada, the US, Japan and the Netherlands have all applied to Biosecurity Australia to export beef to Australia. The commencement of import risk analyses for beef from the US, Canada and Japan was announced on 8 April 2010. The import risk analysis for beef from the Netherlands has not commenced. In relation to these countries, only the US has applied to FSANZ for BSE food safety assessment. New Zealand has also made an application to FSANZ for a BSE food safety assessment.

## What is happening with the IRAs? Why have they stopped?

The import risk analyses for beef from the US, Canada and Japan have been paused following Biosecurity Australia invoking the 'stop the clock' provision of the Quarantine Regulations 2000 (the Regulations). This step may be taken in certain situations, for example, when further information essential to complete an IRA is not provided by the other country. The Beef IRA has been paused for all three countries for the following reasons:

- Japan had a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, which was considered a significant international quarantine circumstance limiting Biosecurity Australia's ability to complete the import risk analysis within the regulated timeframe
- The US and Canada have advised that they are currently unable to provide further information that is essential to complete the import risk analysis.

Invoking the 'stop the clock' provision pauses the import risk analyses and gives the US and Canada additional time to provide the requested information on their cattle health status, beef production, inspection and certification systems, outside of the regulated timeframe. It also allows Japan time to regain its former foot-and-mouth disease free status, be recognised by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and be evaluated by Australia.

The status of these import risk analyses does not change the Government's BSE food safety policy and is not expected to impede the progress of the United States submission for a FSANZ BSE food safety assessment.

## When will the IRAs restart?

Biosecurity Australia will consider restarting the import risk analyses when the US, Canada and Japan are in a position to meet regulatory process requirements. This includes submitting complete information on their cattle health status, beef production, inspection and certification systems to Biosecurity Australia for consideration and in Japan's case, regaining its former foot-and-mouth disease free status.

## Will there be opportunity for consultation?

Biosecurity Australia will conduct an import risk analysis for animal health issues. This process means that Biosecurity Australia will consult with stakeholders at key stages of the process.

## How much beef do we export and to where?

Australia exported \$4.1 billion of beef last year to 110 countries, making it the world's second largest exporter of beef. The largest export markets for Australian beef are Japan (\$1.81 billion), United States (\$0.96 billion) and South Korea (\$0.47 billion).

### **Won't our beef exports be affected?**

It is not expected that the new policy will affect Australia's exports. New Zealand has had a policy in place since 2002 that allows beef imports from countries that have reported cases of BSE, with no significant effect on its \$2 billion annual exports of beef.

### **Will cattle be imported into Australia as a result of this change?**

No. Conditions for live cattle imports have not changed.

### **What about other beef products?**

Cattle semen and embryos can be imported from many different countries providing they meet a series of stringent conditions set out in an import permit and verified by AQIS.

Gelatine sourced from skins and hides can be imported from any country if it is commercially prepared.