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Mad Cow: Even Innocent Pay a Price

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GAMACHES-EN-VEXIN, France (AP) — Guillaume Forzy looks at his perfectly healthy cows — cows that slaughterhouses refuse to buy — and ponders the future of his business in a steak-loving country that has lost its appetite for beef.

For 20 years, the farmer has carefully fed his animals with alfalfa, sugar beet, hay and grass, avoiding the meat and bone meal now suspected of transmitting mad cow disease. Even so, his business has been tainted by the mad cow panic that has nearly immobilized the beef industry in France.

“It’s a crisis,” the breeder said. “I am being punished because the consumer is afraid.”

Some scientists believe that mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, originated in Britain when cattle were given feed containing the ground-up remains of sheep infected with a brain ailment. Britain reported its first case of mad cow in 1986.



A farmer feeds his cattle
AP/Michel Lipchitz [28K]



French farmer looks at a field of alfalfa
AP/Michel Lipchitz [24K]

France banned the use of meat and bone meal in cattle feed in 1990 and extended the ban to cover certain other animals in 1994. As public fears about food safety reached a crescendo this month, France slapped a temporary blanket ban on all livestock feeds containing the ground-up remains of carcasses.

The ban was intended to reassure consumers, many of whom have stopped eating meat over concerns that it could trigger the human form of mad cow — Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a fatal ailment



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that eats holes in the brain.

Forzy sees few signs that customers have been reassured.

On his 740-acre farm in a small village in Normandy, 10 of the 150 cows — worth \$920 each — are waiting to be butchered. But no slaughterhouse is willing to buy them.

Forzy exports bulls to Italy each year. But Italy, along with several other European countries, recently banned imports of French beef. The farmer fears he'll have no buyers when the bulls are ready to go to market in March.

Beef sales have plunged by half in France since news surfaced last month that potentially infected meat reached supermarket shelves. The news came as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease claimed its first two victims here: One woman has already died and another, a 19-year old boy, is on his deathbed. Eighty-one people have died of the disease in Britain.

In France, meanwhile, the number of infected cows continues to rise each week. Some 121 cases have been detected this year, up from 31 last year. The government says the increase is due to stricter nationwide testing, but the public is not convinced.

Portugal, Germany and Spain reported their first cases of mad cow disease last week, fueling a Europe-wide panic that has led to stricter regional measures on cattle breeding.

Forzy believes the best alternative to animal-based feed is alfalfa, which he cultivates on his farm. He feeds his cattle a combination of alfalfa, sugarbeet and hay in the winter and grass in the summer.

“Alfalfa is a natural vegetable,” Forzy said. “The animals love it. It's very nutritious, very rich.”

He remains convinced that stricter government standards for production makes beef safer to eat now than at any time over the past few years.

“There is no problem,” Forzy said. “It's healthy and natural. But we've made consumers afraid.”

Forzy points a finger across the English Channel at Britain, accusing the neighboring country of continuing to export potentially contaminated feed after it was banned there in 1996.

“For us, England is totally responsible,” Forzy said angrily. “They put their products on the market everywhere.”

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The British Department of Agriculture denies such charges, saying Britain was banned from exporting feed containing beef products at that time and strictly adhered to the ban.

As France's meat industry continues to suffer, Forzy tries to predict when the crisis will end.

“It could be over after Christmas, it could be two or three years,” he said. “If the consumer doesn’t regain confidence in French beef I can no longer practice my profession.”

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