

Agricultural Marketing Report



Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1172

June 2004-AMR 04-01

Consumer Response To Beef Due To The December 2003 BSE Incident In The U.S.

By:

Dawn Thilmany, Wendy Umberger and Amanda Ziehl¹

✓ 22% of survey respondents reported they changed their beef purchase behavior since the December 23, 2003 U.S. BSE incident.

✓ When asked to rank price, natural, traceable to the farm, grass-fed, and tested for Mad Cow Disease as important attributes of beef, 46 % of respondents indicated that price was the most important attribute, while 34% indicated the attribute of tested for Mad Cow Disease was most important (with smaller shares for the remaining 3 attributes).

Consumer awareness of a vast array of food safety concerns may be at an all-time high, due to the increasing availability of up-to-the minute media and rapid information dissemination on food related outbreaks. Consumers are acutely aware of threats to the animal product industry after a decade of *E. coli* O157:H7 occurrences and numerous animal health scares (BSE in the United Kingdom and Japan, and most recently two isolated incidences in North America; Foot and Mouth Disease among international trading partners). The National Cattleman's Beef Association website released findings from their own consumer surveys that found the Canadian BSE outbreak raised consumer awareness of BSE, but consumer confidence in the food supply remained high. The consumer response to the U.S. BSE incident confirms this message. Awareness among consumers of BSE was at 96% following the U.S. discovery, compared with 61% in Fall 2003. Similarly, a survey conducted in January 2004 by the Food Policy Institute at Rutgers University found that 85% of the 1,001 continental U.S. consumers surveyed were knowledgeable of the December U.S. BSE case (Hallman, Schilling, Turvey). Nevertheless, consumer confidence remained strong, going from 88% in September 2003 to 89% in January 2004 (<http://www.beef.org/>).

Public response to the BSE scare was rapid and continues to evolve. One of the first actions taken by the USDA was a new set of regulations (primarily related to feeding protocols and advanced meat recovery systems) released on January 12, 2004. More recently, the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection service (USDA-APHIS) announced an enhanced BSE surveillance program substantially increasing the number of animals tested for BSE. There is little information on what assurances this additional testing might provide to consumers; thereby, the impact of additional testing on beef demand is unknown. Following Piggott and Marsh's 2004 research, there may not be long-term effects from this isolated case of BSE, even if there are short-term impacts.

¹ Funding for this study came from the Colorado Ag Experiment Station, Colorado Homestead Ranches (as part of a USDA Value-Added Grant) and Rocky Mountain Farmers Union (through the Cooperative Development Center).

However, there has been little analysis of how BSE has changed beef purchases among U.S. consumers, what current U.S. consumer perceptions are of the risks related to beef, and how much U.S. consumers might value products that give assurances to mitigate those perceived risks, such as testing of beef products for BSE. This fact sheet presents the initial analysis of a national consumer survey conducted by Colorado State University to investigate a number of issues affecting consumer preferences, willingness to pay and purchase decisions, including the effects of the BSE incident.

The survey was collected by the National Family Opinion research group using their online survey methods distributed randomly among their respondent pool (but stratified to include a relatively high share of Coloradans). The final data set represents 1288 complete responses from non-vegetarian consumers who completed the survey in the Spring (March/April) of 2004.

Figure 1 shows that about 22% of the 1288 total survey respondents reported they changed their beef purchase behavior since the December 23, 2003, U.S. BSE incident. To ascertain the type of beef purchasing changes being made, respondents who said “yes” were asked to indicate the types of purchasing changes they made. Of those who have changed their behavior ($n = 283$), over half (57.2%) are buying less beef, indicating that approximately 13% of our surveyed population had reduced their beef purchases as of March/April 2004. The Rutgers University Food Policy Institute Survey conducted a few months earlier (in January 2004) found that nearly 17% of their respondents had reduced their beef consumption after the December BSE incident. A small share of respondents indicated they are buying more meat (mostly due to their perceptions of more affordable prices), 27.6% have not made changes, and 12.7% are buying different types of beef (Figure 2). Going even further with this line of questioning, the respondents who said they were buying different types of beef were then asked about the primary change in type of beef (see Figure 3). There are four major categories for how consumers ($n=32$, or less than 3% of all respondents) reported that their purchases changed, including cut of beef (28.1%), purchase location (31.3%), brand (25%) and production practice (15.6%).

An even greater number of respondents shared detailed responses in an open-ended question on why their purchases changed. The greatest number (31) said it increased their concern and fear about the chance of BSE in the food system, another 23 mentioned something about beef being unsafe or unhealthy for their families and themselves, and 9 were skeptical of current regulations and testing methods. Although these comments were given by a small percentage of respondents (less than 5%), any loss in consumer confidence may be of concern to the beef industry. Another set of consumers (27) responded that they were eating less beef and changing their diets to other meat products, but 4 resumed purchases after the initial scare was over.

Another line of reasoning in the consumer panel was that consumers could change their purchase behavior to manage the risk of BSE fears. One group of consumers (13) stopped purchasing ground beef, while another group (17) now has changed to purchasing only special types of beef in response to the incident. Others altered the marketing channels they use to purchase meat, including a switch to natural/organic producers (6), buying from the same local producer/source (5) and seeking more information on where the meat is coming from (8).

Finally, survey respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 5 a set of five beef attributes (price, natural, traceable to the farm, grass-fed, and tested for Mad Cow Disease) and to rate (1 = most desirable, 5 = least desirable) several different attributes that could be provided and/or altered in the beef products they purchase. Of the five specified beef attributes, 46% of the respondents indicated that price was the most important attribute while 34% indicated the attribute of tested for mad cow disease was most important. The remaining 20% of respondents indicated either grass-fed, traceable to the farm, or natural were the most important beef attribute (Figure 4). Figure 5 shows the average ratings by desirability category for a number of these beef-related attributes, including the assurance that meat was tested for mad cow disease. This attribute received the highest number of extremely desirable ratings (even above “good value for price”), illustrating the derived demand for safety assurances among consumers.

While the desirability of the “tested for mad cow disease” attribute is high, the costs of the currently available BSE tests are estimated to be \$20 to \$30 per head. There is no evidence that consumers are willing to pay for the additional costs of BSE tests. Furthermore, there are limitations and concerns associated with the currently available BSE testing methods (Ray; American Meat Institute).

Future analysis by the CSU research team will focus on the willingness to pay for beef tested for mad cow disease using conjoint analysis, and also use cluster analysis and other statistical models to better describe the set of consumers who have changed their beef purchase behavior after the December 2004 BSE incident. These subsequent analyses will focus on whether there are market-based programs that may be economically feasible, and effectively targeted, as a means to counter remaining concerns about the safety of the beef supply in the current market environment.

References:

American Meat Institute (AMI) Fact Sheet. 2004. “Testing for BSE: What It Can, and Cannot Accomplish.” AMI Fact Sheet. Available online at: http://www.meatami.com/content/presscenter/factsheets_Infokits/TestingforBSE.pdf

Hallman, W.K., B.J. Schilling, C.G. Turvey. 2004. “Public Perceptions and Responses to Mad Cow Disease: A National Survey of Americans.” Fact Sheet, Food Policy Institute, Rutgers University. January. Available online at: <http://www.foodpolicyinstitute.org/docs/summary/madcowsum.pdf>

Piggott, N.E. and T.L. Marsh. 2004. “Does Food Safety Information Impact US Meat Demand?” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 86(1): 154-174.

Ray, D. 2004. “Whatever happened to “An abundance of caution?” *Policy Pennings*. Article #195, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center, University of Tennessee. April 30. Available online at: <http://apacweb.ag.utk.edu/weekpdf/195.pdf>

USDA-APHIS. 2004. “APHIS’ Enhanced Surveillance Program for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy.” APHIS Veterinary Services Factsheet, June. Available online at: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/bse-enhan_surv/fs_bsesurv.pdf

Have your purchases of beef changed since the isolated incident of mad cow disease on December 23, 2003?

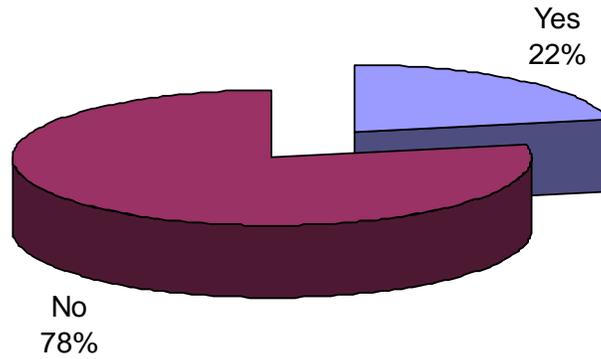


Figure 1. Percent of Respondents Who Changed Their Purchases of Beef Since the December 2003 U.S. BSE Incidence.

How have your purchases of beef changed since the mad cow incident?

(Of 283 who responded that purchases changed)

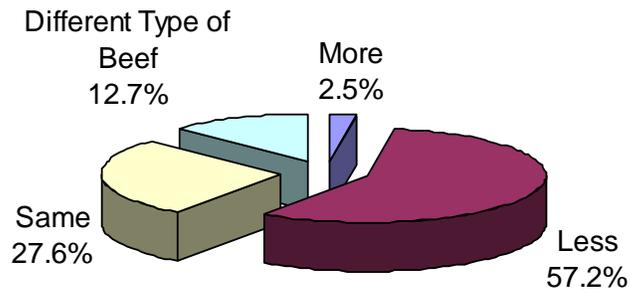


Figure 2. How Respondents Have Changed Their Purchases of Beef Since the December 2003 U.S. BSE Incidence.

What is the Main Thing that has Changed about type of Beef Purchases?

(n=32 out of 1288)

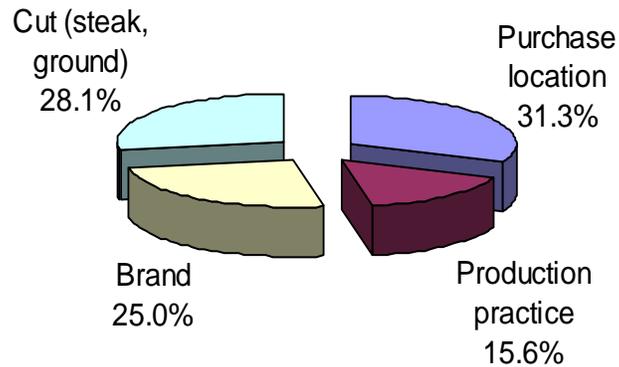


Figure 3. Main Changes in Respondents' Beef Purchases Since the December 2003 U.S. BSE Incidence.

Most Desirable Beef Attributes

5 attributes listed, n=1288

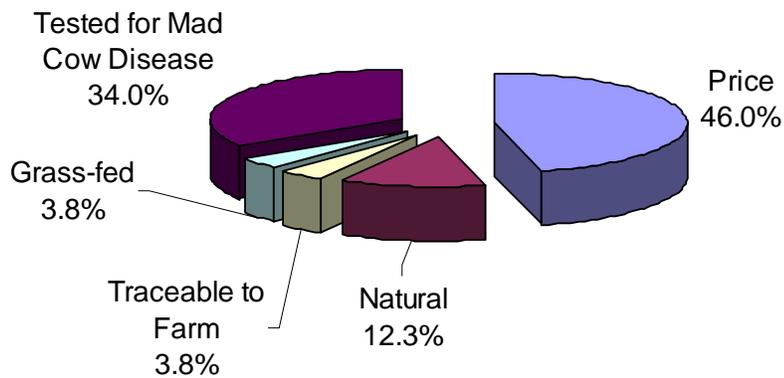


Figure 4. Respondents Most Desirable Beef Attributes.

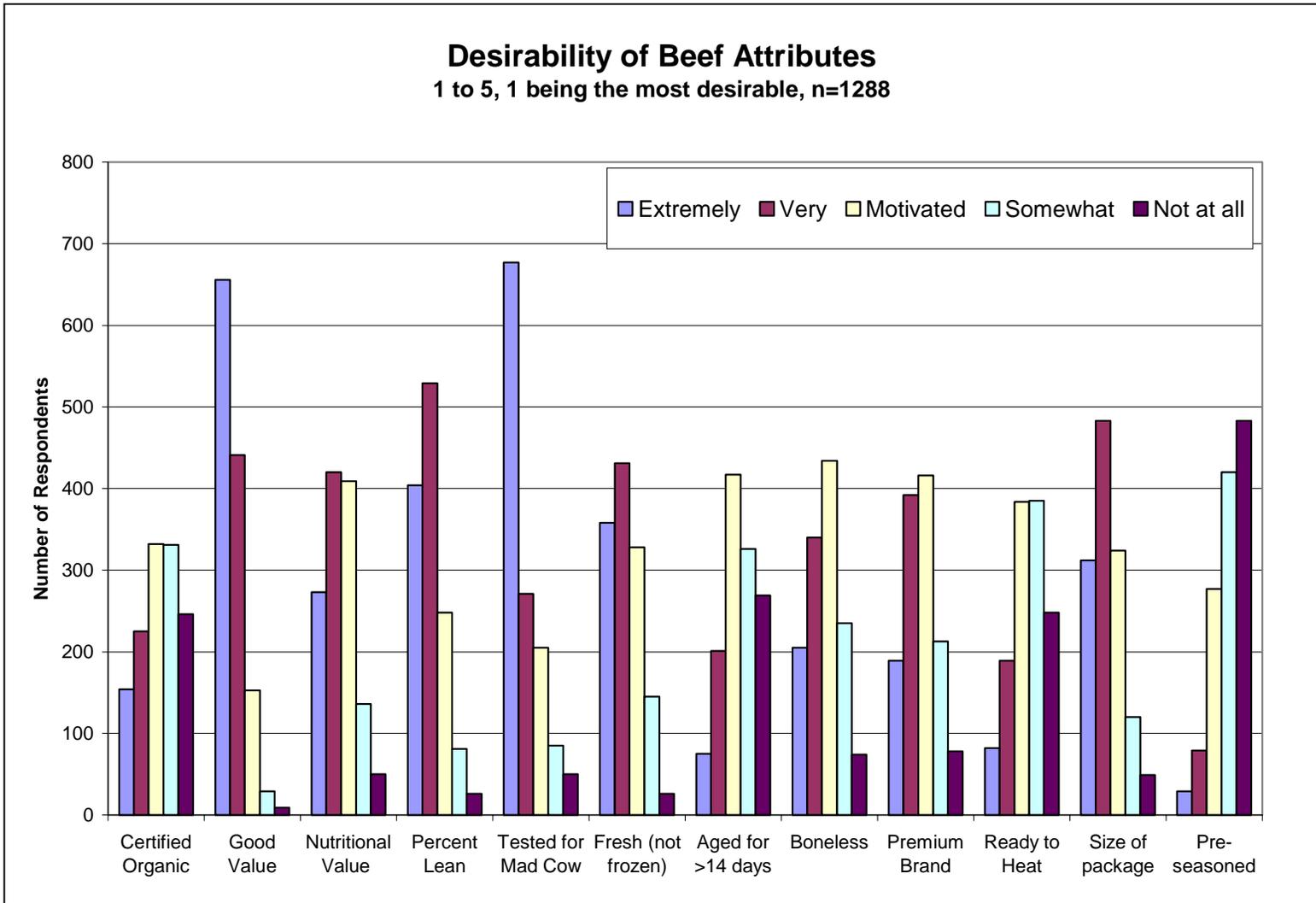


Figure 5. Respondents' Average Ratings for Beef Attributes By Desirability Category