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## Tracking Spread of 'Mad Cow' In Europe Remains Random

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BRUSSELS -- Two summers ago, a German doctor named Ingo Malm decided to set up a private laboratory to test cattle for mad-cow disease. By last March, Bovinia GmbH was offering its services to slaughterhouses and retailers across southern Germany.

Dr. Malm was about to run into a brand of bureaucratic complacency that for years may have effectively masked the extent of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or **BSE**, on the Continent.

The 45-year-old general practitioner soon received a written warning from the Health Ministry of Bavaria, Germany's biggest cattle region. It said that the test kit his eight-employee outfit was using hadn't been certified by Germany's federal government and that, in any case, only the government had the right to test for **BSE**. The kit was licensed from Switzerland's Prionics AG, which had developed one of the first reasonably effective tests for **BSE**.

Dr. Malm kept using the kit, which had been approved by the European Union's top scientific panel, and drew a blunter warning in June. "We have to point out that we must forbid use of the test," read a letter from the director of the Health Ministry of the subdistrict of Upper Bavaria. In September, Dr. Malm shuttered the company, losing 400,000 marks (about \$195,000 or 203,600 euros). A few weeks later, another lab discovered the first of Germany's seven confirmed cases of mad-cow disease.

"It's no surprise they didn't discover any cases of **BSE**

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until now," Dr. Malm says. "They didn't find anything because they didn't want to look."

A spokesman for the Bavarian Health Ministry, Bernhard Seidenath, says the state government blocked the use of Prionics' tests because it feared they might be unreliable; Prionics says its test is the most reliable available. Mr. Seidenath called the threat to effectively shut down Bovinia "history from a long time ago."

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Bovina's fate helps explain why it is only now, nearly five years after Britain acknowledged a link between **BSE** and a similar brain-wasting disease in humans, that much of continental Europe is accepting that it, too, faces a "mad-cow" problem. A form of **BSE**, having jumped the species barrier, has killed more than 80 people, almost all in Britain.

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The first cases of **BSE** in Denmark, Germany and Spain were recorded only recently -- last spring in Denmark, November in Germany and Spain. The incidence in France quintupled last year. Before that, the cattle disease almost certainly existed, but most European Union countries weren't seriously looking for it and, in some cases, thwarted those who were.

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Germany began massive **BSE** testing only in December, after the first recorded case of German **BSE** rattled consumers and shook the government. All across the Continent, as interviews with independent scientists, members of EU inspection teams, local veterinarians and government regulators suggest, measures for tracking mad-cow disease have been haphazard, poorly executed and, in many countries, nearly absent altogether.

Tens of thousands of cattle have died on Continental farms without any **BSE** checks at all. Vets, in turn, lacked the training and resources to identify and test cattle showing **BSE** symptoms, either on farms or in slaughterhouses. The EU did agree in early 1998 to a limited program of random testing. While a similar scheme in Switzerland quickly doubled the number of confirmed cases of mad-cow disease, the EU program instead fell victim to bureaucracy and political indifference.

"We cannot say if this is a new peak in the incidence of **BSE** or if the upsurge in cases this [past] year is only because surveillance wasn't sufficient before," says Gerard Pascal, chairman of the European Commission's standing scientific committee on **BSE** and a leading authority on the subject.

A stepped-up testing program for mad-cow disease that the EU launched last week to calm consumers has stirred more fear and confusion, especially in Germany and

Spain, where **BSE** cases are up sharply. After the first week of compulsory testing, Spain cited three new **BSE** cases Friday, taking its total to five.

The same day, Germany announced plans to broaden its testing to cover younger animals after a private company found a case of **BSE** in a 28-month-old cow. The EU testing program, which started last Monday, requires **BSE** testing for all animals older than 30 months; the German Health Ministry now wants to lower the threshold to 24 months.

Even after the recent surge in **BSE** cases, the reported incidence of the disease on the Continent remains low -- well under 2,000 since 1990, compared with nearly 180,000 in Britain. But the mounting evidence of negligence threatens to stir a political storm over why, for five years, Europe's health and agricultural authorities refused to face up to the disease, allowing hundreds of contaminated animals into the food chain.

Peter Moritz knows all about insufficient surveillance. As the doctor in charge of the main veterinary testing lab for southern Bavaria, he is responsible for checking the brains of cattle found dead on farms or slaughtered under vets' orders after they showed the symptoms of stumbling or fatigue associated with **BSE**. The procedure Dr. Moritz used until recently (he now uses the Prionics test) is fairly simple: He treated the brains with dye, then inspected slices of them under a microscope to see if cells had burst under the influence of prions, the killer proteins in both **BSE** and its human counterpart.

Scores of such brains have been delivered to Dr. Moritz's lab in Oberschleissheim. But half of them were too old or too damaged to be tested properly. Dr. Moritz blames German bureaucracy.

Under German law, a farmer with a dead cow that showed signs of **BSE** must call in a veterinarian. The vet calls in one of a fleet of certified trucks lined with leakproof stainless steel for transporting carcasses. The trucks, operated by a private franchise holder, don't work on Sundays. Eventually, a regional vet takes delivery of the carcass, removes the brain and ships it in a sealed box to Dr. Moritz. The process can take days.

Of the 152 brains Dr. Moritz received in 2000, he was able to test only 62, or about 40%. And that percentage drops during the winter, when the brains freeze, rupturing brain cells and sweeping away the telltale signs of **BSE**. "Most of the samples we received in our laboratory came from cattle that died at a farm with tissue samples too poor to diagnose," he says. "It is possible that animals that died of **BSE** never got tested."

Mr. Seidenath of the Bavarian Health Ministry says part of the problem may lie with Dr. Moritz's testing methods, but he acknowledges that the government needs to speed up the delivery of brain samples.

The discovery of **BSE** in Germany was especially embarrassing because it had nothing to do with the government. The first case was uncovered because Ulrich Spengler, the director of a small private testing laboratory in Hamburg, Artus AG, made a useful business contact through his Spanish teacher.

In 1998, Dr. Spengler, 33, quit a doctoral program at the Institute for Tropical Diseases in Hamburg to set up a three-person lab for Germany's organic-food market, offering testing for diseases such as salmonella, which the German government doesn't check systematically. He decided early this year to add **BSE** tests to his list of services and, like Dr. Malm, flew to Zurich to stitch up a contract with Prionics. The Hamburg Health Inspection Ministry didn't threaten to shut him down, though he says local politicians went around telling potential customers that testing was a waste of time.

Then, last autumn, his Spanish teacher told him about a small slaughterhouse in Galenburg, in Lower Saxony, that was trying to establish a niche market for organic beef. Dr. Spengler traveled to Galenburg to try to sell his salmonella testing service. As an afterthought, he threw in **BSE** testing. "It was my first customer, so I made them a special cheap offer for the two types of tests," Dr. Spengler says.

Within a month, tests at Galenburg uncovered Germany's first confirmed case of **BSE**.

-- *Edward Taylor and Konstantin Richter contributed to this article.*

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