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'Mad cow' disease found in goat

A French goat has tested positive for mad cow disease - the first animal in the world other than a cow to have bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

The European Commission says further testing will be done to see if the incidence is an isolated one.

The animal, which was slaughtered in 2002, was initially thought to have scrapie, a similar brain-wasting condition sometimes seen in goats.

But British scientists have now confirmed the disease was in fact BSE.

More than 100 people in the UK have died from vCJD (variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease), the human form of BSE, after eating tainted beef.

But the EC stressed on Friday that precautionary measures put in place in recent years to protect the human food chain from contaminated meats meant there was no need for alarm over the latest finding.

Markos Kyprianou, EU Commissioner responsible for Health and Consumer Protection, said: "I want to reassure consumers that existing safety measures in the EU offer a very high level of protection."

"This case was discovered thanks to the EU testing system in place in France.

"The testing programme has shown us that there is a very low incidence rate of TSEs (transmissible spongiform encephalopathies) in goats and allowed us to detect suspect animals so that they can be taken out of the food chain, as was done with this goat and its entire herd."

UK expert opinion

BSE had not previously been found under natural circumstances in ruminants other than cattle - although its presence in goats or other ruminants had been viewed as theoretically possible.

Although some incidences of TSEs in animals such as cats and antelopes have looked very similar to the BSE strain, there is some debate over whether these really were mad



Goat meat is subject to the same strict controls as beef

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COW.

In 2001, a study in the UK was thought to have found BSE in sheep. It later transpired, however, that the scientists working on the research study were mistakenly looking at samples obtained from cow brains.

The EC now wants to test 200,000 goats in the 25 EU member states over the next six months.

The testing would concentrate on countries where cases of BSE have been reported in cattle in the past, including the UK.

Current testing has already shown there is a low incidence of scrapie in goats. In the UK, for example, only two cases have been confirmed since 1997. In France, which has a far bigger goat population, just 19 positives were recorded among 21,000 animals tested in 2003.

Across the EU bloc as a whole, there are believed to be more than 11.5 million goats.

The European Commission's Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health will meet to discuss the case of the French goat and its implications next week.

The French agriculture ministry said the goat came from the Ardeche region, in southeast France. It was kept in a flock of 300 animals which were all slaughtered and their carcasses destroyed.

When French research was unable to distinguish the TSE found in the goat from the BSE strain, samples were sent to the Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) for TSEs in Weybridge, UK, for its expert opinion. It confirmed the presence of the BSE strain.

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