The Cow That Stole Christmas

By Kendal Frazier, NCBA Chief Operating Officer

Do you remember what you were doing on Dec. 23, 2003? I do and I will never forget it.

I was trying to wrap up some year-end projects and was making plans for my Christmas vacation. The NCBA Washington D.C. office got a call from USDA at 1:30 p.m. EST with the message that a dairy cow from Washington state had tested positive for BSE, or Mad Cow Disease.

NCBA CEO Terry Stokes immediately convened a meeting of NCBA’s Issues Management, Public Relations and Policy staff. Stokes informed us of the BSE case and team members immediately updated talking points and key messages, started working on an Issues Advisory for NCBA stakeholders and activated a dark web site that had been built several years before. The web site was designed to be activated if the United States ever had a BSE case.

Early planning proved to be critical. In the 1990’s when BSE was hammering the beef industry in Great Britain, NCBA put together a Crisis Preparedness Plan for a case in the U.S. The plan was funded by the beef checkoff through the Issues Management project. In the spring of 2003 a BSE case was diagnosed in Canada. The news media coverage from the Canadian case spilled over into the U.S. news media. The Canadian case caused NCBA to execute part of the U.S. BSE plan.

NCBA learned Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman was having a news conference at 5:30 p.m. EST to announce the BSE case. Immediately we sent an e-mail to a readied

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list of national and trade news media, inviting them to a tele-news conference one hour after Venemar’s conference, with a strategy of providing an industry perspective.

Nearly 150 news media participated in NCBA’s news conference. In addition, a core team of NCBA spokespersons conducted nearly 100 individual interviews with the news media within a few hours of the USDA announcement.

A team of 15-20 NCBA staff supported by the NCBA officers worked daily on the BSE issue, including Christmas and New Years Day, until January 4. The team set aside other work and focused solely on the BSE case. The government, NCBA and its state affiliates and beef councils were able to speak with one voice and deliver the message that “U.S. beef is safe.” The state/national partnership was a key in managing the BSE issue. Independent consumer tracking research showed that consumer confidence in the safety of U.S. beef never faltered.

While consumers in the U.S. remained confident in the safety of U.S. beef, countries around the world immediately closed their doors to U.S. exports. It took eight years for the U.S. to gain back the export volume of December 2003. (See Chart).

The cow in Washington stole the Christmas of the U.S. beef industry in 2003. The dedication, hard work and passion for beef and cattlemen exhibited by the NCBA staff, state affiliate and beef council staff and national and state volunteer leaders who worked the BSE issue is something that I will never forget.
How did the U.S. beef industry retain consumer confidence in the safety of the U.S. beef supply in December 2003? Here are some examples.

**Planning:** NCBA and its predecessor organizations watched BSE in Great Britain in the 1990's and put together a plan for the first case in the U.S. The plan was funded by the beef checkoff through the Issues Management project. When BSE came to the U.S. NCBA staff and volunteers had a plan to execute. The plan included a dark web site that was immediately activated.

**USDA:** Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman and Dr. Ron DeHaven were excellent spokespersons. They reassured consumers that U.S. beef was safe and that the government had taken steps through the years to assure that it remained safe. Former NCBA employee Alisa Harrison who was in charge of USDA's communications efforts did a great job.

**State/National Partnership:** NCBA and its state cattlemen’s associations and beef councils were able to speak with “one voice” on the BSE issue. NCBA had excellent spokespersons including CEO Terry Stokes, Dr. Gary Weber, Chandler Keys, other NCBA staff and the NCBA officers, including Jan Lyons. Having a woman NCBA officer speaking to consumers was a plus for managing the issue. State organization staff and volunteer leadership also did an excellent job.

**Location:** The livestock organizations in Washington state, led by Washington Beef Commission Executive Director Patti Brumbach, had a crisis preparedness plan. Brumbach is an experienced public relations and issues management professional. Her efforts on the ground in Washington state made a big difference.

**Beef Checkoff:** While advertising and other marketing programs are the “face” of the beef checkoff, the Beef Promotion Operating Committee funded the first Issues Management project in 1988. Checkoff dollars were used to fund a BSE Crisis Preparedness Plan. It would have been difficult to manage the BSE issue without the resources from the beef checkoff. NCBA and Cattlemen’s Beef Board leadership worked closely through the BSE issue to make sure resources were available to manage the issue.