



# WHAT IT MEANS TO U.S. BEEF

BY LARRY STALCUP & JAMES HUNT

**“Oui” is French for answering “yes” to a question.** The U.S. cattle industry hopes that another French tag, “OIE,” also spells “yes” for increased beef exports.

OIE is the international acronym for the World Organization for Animal Health headquartered in Paris—an organization that can, in effect, brand a country's beef as safe for consumption...or not. For beef-exporting countries, meeting OIE standards gives their international customers the assurance that science-based measures are in place to effectively address any possible risk from bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and other dangerous diseases.

The USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) follows OIE standards to help assure that U.S. beef and other meats are safe and healthy for sale as exports. The U.S., like all other member countries, participates in the review process when the OIE proposes new or updates existing standards.

That gives APHIS an opportunity to provide input into shaping the international standards based on current understanding of the science. But it also provides an avenue for animal health professionals who are continents away to monitor and critique U.S. beef production.

Jim Butler, deputy-director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, says that, in general, OIE has much to say about international trade of beef and other meat products.

“The challenges U.S. producers and feeders will continue to face from OIE would likely deal with trade,” says Butler, who in mid-March helped host a dinner for OIE and other U.S. and international animal health leaders.

**OIE isn't a new breed.** It has been around since 1924, when the world decided there was a need to fight animal diseases at a global level. Originally called the *Office International des Epizooties* (OIE), it became the World Organization for



Animal Health in 2003 but kept its historical acronym.

OIE is recognized as a reference organization for animal health by the powerful World Trade Organization (WTO) and has 172 member countries and territories, including the U.S. In essence, it is the world's regulator of animal health.

"OIE is an influential, internationally recognized, standard-setting body that publishes animal health standards for international trade," says Chuck Lambert, USDA deputy under secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs. "OIE was created to monitor and improve animal health worldwide.

"It works to encourage transparency in the global animal disease situation, to collect, analyze and disseminate veterinary science information, and to provide expertise and encourage international solidarity in the control of animal diseases."

Lambert says the U.S. actively participates in OIE and on its committees. As part of this participation, the U.S. has a vote on the BSE or other disease status of other countries. "In addition, we provide scientific input and have the opportunity to review, comment and voice concerns regarding the development of international standards," he says.

"We work to make sure standards are not only science-based but are applied in a fair and workable manner."

Dennis Erpelding, past chairman of the U.S. Meat Export Federation and manager of corporate affairs for Elanco Animal Health, says OIE also provides guidance for appropriate animal care.

"Our beef industry is in a global marketplace, and it's important for our government (and industry) to work with OIE to assure our products meet the global standards and guidelines," says Erpelding.



He stresses that OIE approval is a valuable tool to regaining market access for U.S. beef. And as U.S. beef exports are expected to top 1.9 billion pounds in 2008— inching ever closer to the 2.5 billion-pounds-plus, pre-BSE levels of 2003—OIE recognition is essential.

The U.S. received controlled risk status (CRS) from OIE last May, and Lambert says CRS will play a crucial role in meeting and expanding those export numbers. (APHIS notes that the U.S. had already received OIE recognition as a country free of FMD, Rinderpest and contagious bovine Pleuropneumonia, which along with BSE, are the four diseases for which the OIE provides official status).

OIE's recommended health standards are aimed at maintaining fair trading practices. Currently, many countries maintain different sets of regulations on importing animals and animal products from BSE-affected areas. The new OIE guidelines create a basic set of science-based rules that are designed to help standardize regulations and import requirements.

APHIS says the CRS classification provides strong support that U.S. cattle and beef products of all ages are safe and that BSE-mitigation measures are effectively applied. "It provides assurance to other countries that we are addressing their concerns, so commodities such as live cattle and cattle products can be safely traded because of the mitigations being applied," says Lambert.

"The U.S. is working to reopen and regain markets for cattle and beef exports, and CRS categorization is a positive accomplishment regarding trade, as many countries are interested in cattle and beef imports produced in line with OIE recommendations.

"In addition, products are more marketable because of the lower risk associated with countries recognized as having controlled BSE risk status."

**It doesn't stop with CRS,** says FAO's Butler. Headquartered in Rome, FAO is the United Nations' agricultural arm that helps develop crop and livestock industries and works with OIE. Butler says that U.S. producers and feeders do an excellent job of safeguarding animal health. But there

can be isolated incidents that can alert the international body to potential risks that could impact consumers and animals in other countries. "There can be concerns if there is a disease outbreak in an isolated area," says Butler,

referring to a brucellosis or tuberculosis-type situation.

"If an outbreak occurs, the U.S. has to demonstrate to the trading partners how we can handle the disease and restrict movement of animals, in accordance with the OIE standards."

### **A New Arena: Animal Welfare**

Well established as an international authority on animal health, OIE has broadened its mission in recent years to include issues related to animal welfare. In February 2004, the OIE held its first conference on animal welfare, and at that time it was proposed that OIE should be the organization to develop international animal welfare guidelines.

*(continued on page 152)*

(continued from page 43)

Kay Johnson-Smith, executive vice president of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, says OIE was apparently motivated to move into the animal welfare arena because it saw other organizations, including animal rights activists, seeking to take the lead on the subject.

“In an attempt to keep (development of animal welfare guidelines) within a scientific discussion or scientific body, (OIE) used that February 2004 conference to sell the idea that they are the (appropriate) organization, and they voted as an organization to take on this issue,” says Smith.

“They were kind of self-appointed. But I think OIE’s reasons were to keep (animal welfare) out of more politically charged venues,” says Smith. She believes, “If a group is going to do it, it’s probably the right group,” because animal welfare can relate to animal health and because OIE has a track record of being committed to sound science, not political agendas.

Still, Smith does have some concerns. Unlike its status as the WTO’s preferred authority on animal health, “OIE doesn’t have legal standing at an international level to create any official requirements on animal welfare,” says Smith.

But she says there is always the possibility that OIE recommendations on animal welfare could become sanctioned by the WTO as official standards

for international trade or that even individual nations might absorb OIE guidelines into their import protocols.

“Could a country require (OIE guideline adherence) of other trading partners? The answer is: Yes they could, (at which point) it becomes a trade issue or a trade barrier,” says Smith.

Because of the possible implications for trade, Smith says the United States must exert as much influence as possible on the actual writing of OIE’s animal welfare guidelines. She notes that in terms of awarding voting strength, OIE doesn’t differentiate between its members on the basis of population—each of its 172 members gets one vote when it’s time for the organization to make a decision. That means the United States has no more voting clout than Fiji.

In the five years OIE has been engaged in developing animal welfare guidelines, it has pursued the issues of harvesting animals for human consumption and for disease control as well as transportation of animals by land and sea. It is now just beginning the process of addressing housing of farm animals and production practices. At the present, the OIE has not finalized any reports on these issues.

## A Different Way of Thinking

OIE is headed by Director General Dr. Bernard Vallat. His background, and that of most OIE staffers, is from animal health; most of them are veterinarians.

“Most member countries are developing countries represented by people with different cultures, experiences and concerns,” says Butler, noting that many OIE representatives see animal welfare as “sows and poultry in free range,” similar to cattle herds. “That’s the standard in many parts of the world,” he stresses, “and these are the people who can help shape the international standards that will determine how the U.S. can export beef to Japan or other countries.”

Maintaining the confidence of the veterinarian representatives of the other OIE member countries is a challenge. Butler says a minimum number of these vets have visited the U.S. They may not understand how a commercial feedyard operates and how such a large number of cattle can be handled with proper care to prevent a major disease outbreak.

He says producers should be interested in educating OIE about industry operations. “We need to demystify feedyard operations for the OIE and developing countries,” says Butler. “We need to pro-

vide them a better understanding of how the U.S. beef industry operates. We need to invite them to travel to the U.S. and interact with feedyards.”

The concept of a public-private partnership with shared ownership, common in the U.S. industry, is foreign to many OIE members. “That gets into everything from where you buy your vaccines, who administers them, etc.,” says Butler.

“I would like to see TCFA and other livestock organizations host a tour for Director General Vallat and others in OIE.

“Our industry has a big stake. I think it would be good for U.S. industry representatives to visit OIE in Paris and learn more about the organization. We have to understand that OIE is the world regulating body for animal health. Knowing how it operates can help all of us understand their beliefs and goals.” 🐾

EDITOR’S NOTE—Larry Stalcup is an agricultural freelance writer from Amarillo. James Hunt is TCFA Communications Director.

