

# Lamb faces the chop in latest meat scare

Public confidence in lamb as well as beef took a hammering yesterday after EU scientists recommended a Europe-wide ban on some lamb on the bone. **Katherine Butler in Brussels says it could mean the end of sales of certain cuts.**

European scientists want tough restrictions on the sale of lamb on the bone, it emerged yesterday. The committee dealt a new blow to the meat industry, reeling from the recent ban of beef on the bone. It recommended a ban on sales of lamb on the bone from animals over 12 months old.

But, crucially for the British market, and the 90,000 sheep farmers in the UK, the scientists said that in countries where the incidence of BSE or scrapie in

flocks is particularly high, "it may be appropriate" to ban meat on the bone from animals as young as six months.

The panel of scientists which advises Brussels on food safety and which is independent of European governments, said rack of lamb, and lamb chops or cutlets should be banned. It recommended that a ban on cattle sheep and goat brains and offal, due to come into force throughout the EU early next year, should be extended to cover vertebral column and dorsal root ganglia of all three species. The warning adds to consumer confusion and alarm by raising questions for the first time over the safety of lamb and mutton sold on the bone, particularly from animals older than 12 months old.

European Commission officials will have to conduct thorough research on the risks from lamb but they stressed that factors highlighted by the scientists

would have to be weighed against the consequences of a ban, such as the impact on trade, the cost and the problem of disposal of carcasses. "The Commission may decide that a ban would be too drastic when set against the risks, but for the moment we cannot say," said a spokesman. He added that the coming weeks and months would be spent trying to establish a "complete picture" of the risks, taking account of the age, species and geographical origin of animals.

Either way, the damage to consumer confidence is likely to be extensive. Scrapie in sheep was not previously believed to pose a threat to human health but is thought to be much more prevalent in European flocks than governments have officially admitted. Its similarity to BSE prompted the Commission's initial decision to include sheep offal in its crackdown on "specified risk material".

## BSE scientist was 'censored'

A former government scientist who was one of the first to investigate BSE and identify it in cats claims that his work was "censored" by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Maff), which prevented him from publishing work that would have pointed to the disease's emergence in humans.

Iain McGill worked at the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) with Gerald Wells, the vet who in 1986 first identified "mad cow disease", or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

He says that attempts by him and Mr Wells to submit a paper about the emergence of BSE in cats in 1990 were censored by officials within Maff, who threatened to invoke the Offi-

cial Secrets Act to prevent them submitting their work to scientific journals.

"I think censorship is the word I would use to describe what happened with that paper," Mr McGill says on tonight's edition of Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme. "They wanted us to take out any references suggesting a causal link between BSE and the new disease in cats."

In May 1990 he and Mr Wells examined a cat which had died in Bristol. Their immediate reaction was that the cat had died from a disease related to - or even caused by - BSE. They informed their managers of their suspicions.

Days later, the chief veteri-

nary officer, Keith Meldrum, went on TV to discuss the case. But he said the disease was "highly unlikely" to be BSE "because of the precautions that have been taken by various people", though he added he "could not give a guarantee ... what it is".

Mr McGill thinks that Mr Meldrum would have known about their diagnosis. Did he think Mr Meldrum's reply was scientific thinking? "I think it's wishful thinking."

He says that when he worked at Maff, "the way it was structurally set up was not that the science would drive the politics, but that the politics will drive the science. And that's wrong".

## Wayward b...



Richard Branson's flyaway balloon canopy (above) was yesterday under guard in Algeria - and tied to a tree in case it tried to escape again, writes Charles

## Atlantic row record

The British rower John Searson last night smashed the record for the fastest east-west solo crossing of the Atlantic by 17 weeks when he arrived in Barbados.

Family, friends and a steel band welcomed Searson, a 35-year-old meteorologist, as he completed the 2,800-mile journey in his boat *Commodore Shipping*, Tenerife to Port St Charles, Barbados, in 59 days and 16 hours. Searson, from Jersey, arrived 16 days inside the previous record of 75 days, between the Canaries and Antigua by Sney Genders of England in 1969-70.