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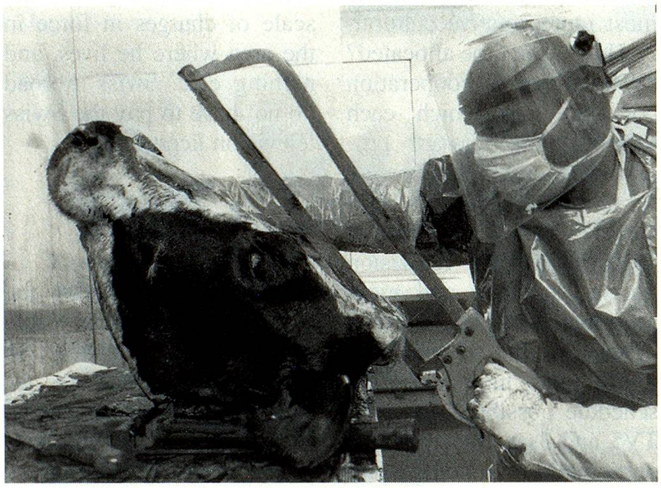
Federal Council plan ignored

A cheap solution to mad cow disease

In order to free Switzerland from the stigma of mad cow disease and at the same time calm down consumers, the Federal Council wanted to cull 230,000 cows at a cost of Sfr. 320 million. But parliament is only prepared to accept that more than 2000 cows should be slaughtered for a price of Sfr. 8 million.

*Willy Schenk**

With 230 cases of BSE, Switzerland is in third place for mad cow disease behind the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. In spite of the enormous difference between that figure and the 160,000 cases reported in the United Kingdom, we still count as a country affected by the epidemic. Since this disease may apparently be contracted by humans from eating beef, its consumption – which was already in decline – has now fallen massively. The EU has boycotted suspect beef and forced the United Kingdom and Ireland to slaughter all those animals which could have been fed with infected animal feed. The German state of Baden-Württemberg also declared a ban on the import of Swiss beef, which two dozen countries across the world have now joined.



The skull of a cow which died from mad cow disease being examined. There is still much that is uncertain about the causes and course of this illness. (Photo: Keystone)

Boycott of Swiss meat

Switzerland is not a classical meat exporting country. But reservations by Italy, France and Germany against Swiss breeding cattle are very strong. Although Italy has for the moment relaxed its import ban, exports of cattle and beef products fell by Sfr. 120 million in 1996. The Netherlands have also cancelled the planned import of 5,000 cows. If the foreign boycott were to be extended to dairy products such as cheese, Switzerland would have to count with an additional export fall of Sfr. 500 million.

The Federal Council decided on dramatic action which was inspired by Britain's large-scale slaughter programme and would have made Switzerland once more a country free of BSE. The plan was to cull 230,000 animals born before the December 1990 prohibition on fodder which might be contaminated, or descended from BSE-infected cows. This would have taken until mid-1999 and would have cost Sfr. 320 million. Farmers would have received Sfr. 1,000 per cow slaughtered, but they would have had to contribute towards the cost by paying a charge of 2 centimes per litre of milk. The purpose of this plan was to reduce significant risk, to calm consumers and to end all foreign boycott measures. At the same time, the severely damaged beef market would be put back on an even keel.

But only the Farmers' Association accepted this plan, and even it criticised the 2 centimes charge on milk. The media brought out the residual risk contained in the fact that the ways in which the disease could be transmitted had been subject to too little research. In addition, combining the two elements of combating the contagion and helping the beef market was criticised. In view of the low level of acceptance of the Federal Council's proposal, the parliamentary advisory commission put forward a cheap solution. This was to do the same as the French and cull only those herds in which BSE cases had actually appeared. But this "French solution" was rejected by the vets. They argued that there was no evidence so far for the disease being transmitted from one animal to another within a herd. The only thing that had been proved were the facts that BSE could be spread by contaminated fodder and that mother cows could pass it on to their calves.

Parliament has also discovered in the French solution another way of limiting the damage. In the case of herds affected by BSE, only calves of BSE-infected cows and animals born before the prohibition of fodder which may have been contaminated need to be slaughtered. This reduced the number of prospective victims from 230,000 to more than 2,000 and the cost from Sfr. 320 million to Sfr. 8 million. On the other hand, parliament added another Sfr. 25 million to subsidise the market, in spite of the fact that the Sfr. 70 million spent in 1996 for this purpose had done very little to help.

Finance Minister Kaspar Villiger described the cheap variant as "a solution in name only." Members of parliament must also be aware that the cheap solution would probably make little impression abroad and would not lead to Switzerland obtaining the status of a country free of BSE. So both the national councillors and the councillors of state want to keep the Federal Council's plan in reserve in case of need. ■

* Willy Schenk was parliamentary editor of the Zurich daily "Tages-Anzeiger" for 30 years.