



ACTIVISTS USE MAD COW SCARE TO ADVANCE IDEOLOGICAL AGENDAS

by

David Martosko

Many experts believe that we have managed to prevent [mad cow disease] from coming here. However, there are others who are most concerned and believe that, no, it's just a matter of time before it turns up here. It really depends on who you ask.

*Dr. Emily Senay, CBS medical reporter, on
"The Early Show," December 7, 2000*

Mad cow disease is very real, and represents a serious public health problem in Europe. Dr. Senay is suggesting it *could* happen in America, though, and she is not alone. More than ten years after American schools pulled apples off of lunch menus in response to unfounded Alar fears, the same old cast of characters is at it again. This group of highly organized individuals, representing a handful of zealous anti-product groups, is orchestrating yet another scare campaign. Whether it is about mad cow disease, genetically improved foods, pesticides, organic farming, sugar, caffeine, "sustainable" agriculture, or animal "rights" (just to name a few), the players are often the same.

This time our sirloin, prime rib, hot dogs, and cheeseburgers have their attention. In order to further their ideological agendas (and to drum up interest in their "sustainable food" and "organic" commercial ventures), these activists will press onward, seeking to convince the American public that mad cow disease poses a threat here at home. Effective junk-science smear campaigns like the current mad cow scare don't appear out of thin air; there is evidence to suggest that this particular one is the result of a carefully coordinated public relations effort.

Nothing Scares Like a Deer. The primary basis for the current American mad cow scare campaign is a supposed connection between mad cow disease and wild deer. In early 1999, two men (one each in Utah and Oklahoma) died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) at an unusually young age. CJD is a debilitating, incurable brain-wasting disorder that strikes about one person in a million. D'Arcy Kemnitz, a Center for Food Safety lawyer (and, not coincidentally, a lobbyist for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), soon claimed in several news stories that a "mad deer disease" had caused the CJD cases.

David Martosko is Director of Research for The Guest Choice Network, a coalition of more than 30,000 restaurant and tavern operators working together to protect the public's right to a full menu of dining and entertainment choices, through education, training, and public outreach.

Since both victims were avid hunters and younger-than-average CJD victims, several willing reporters believed the story that infected game was responsible.

Certain deer and elk do suffer from something called "chronic wasting disease" (CWD), whose symptoms are similar in some ways to European mad cow disease, but scientists have concluded that the two diseases are not linked. On March 27, 1999, The *Calgary Herald* ran a story about one of these victims, Doug McEwen. The very first "expert" commentary came from anti-meat activist John Stauber, who complained that U.S. agencies were not doing enough to learn whether CWD was crossing over into humans. "By the time we see people confirmed as dying of CWD," he said, "those deaths are just going to be the tip of the iceberg."

In the following week, McEwen's death was featured in newspaper and television reports in over 30 media markets. Once momentum was established, Environmental Media Services (EMS) went on the offensive. Its press releases claimed that an "epidemic" of a mad-cow-like disease was ravaging western deer and elk, and suggested a link to CJD in humans.

Science Responds. A few news outlets took the time to ask the scientific community for an informed opinion, and the response was unanimous. The *Daily Oklahoman* ran a front-page story on the subject on April 5, 1999, relying on scientists to set the record straight. Dr. Roger Brumback, a pathology professor at the University of Oklahoma, was unequivocal. "To suddenly call Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease the human form of mad cow disease is incorrect or, at best, misleading," Brumback said. "Most people get CJD because they're born with a genetic defect or as a result of a spontaneous genetic mutation."

On March 18, 2000, Utah State Veterinarian Michael Marshall told the Salt Lake City *Deseret News* that the brains of hundreds of deer in Utah, Maine, South Dakota, and Oklahoma had been tested; none had shown signs of CWD. "These test results should lay to rest any notion that the Utah wildlife hunter died from his contact with Utah deer and elk," Marshall said, referring to Doug McEwen. "[T]here is no connection between Chronic Wasting Disease in wildlife and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans."

Why it Worked. Despite the lack of hard science to back it up, the mad-deer story had what journalists call "legs"; mainstream news articles about it never left the radar screen, showing up in every month of 2000. The story got its staying power from three sources. First, the American mass media had done a thorough job of detailing the European mad cow problem; a domestic report of anything even remotely parallel to it reflected the tone of the European crisis like a lightning rod. Second, the anti-meat PR machine had continuously offered sympathetic activists as quotable "experts" to one news outlet after another. These activists were often relied upon as primary sources, making a "news" story out of nothing.

The third and most visible source of the mad deer story's longevity came from two lawsuits filed in early 1999 by the Humane Farming Association, the Center for Food Safety, and the Center for Media & Democracy. The two legal actions (commonly known as the "McEwen lawsuits") were filed simultaneously but sought different things. The first demanded that FDA expand the regulations regarding the ingredients of ruminant feed, increase ten-fold the mandated record-keeping period for feed producers, and add animals other than ruminants to the list of covered species (in keeping with the mad deer scare).

The second lawsuit, aimed at the Department of Health and Human Services, demanded an immediate study of human infection rates from mad cow disease in the United States; it also sought to require doctors to include CJD along with the mandatory statistics gathered on other diseases, like influenza, AIDS, and diabetes. Elevating CJD to the level of the commonplace would, of course, fit in with the master plan; a common, household-word disease tends to get more press than an obscure ailment with a complicated name. Along with the sponsoring groups, the legal actions listed ten co-petitioners. These were spouses of CJD victims (including Doug McEwen's wife) and long-time environmental activists. More than half were also members of an internet support group (called CJD Voice) which promotes mad cow disease as a way to comfort those seeking .after a loved one dies from "classic" CJD.

CJD Voice leaders appear in print alongside some of the activists whose methods are most troubling. In the April 30, 1998, issue of *Seattle Weekly*, in a feature called "When Your Blood Eats Your Brain," Michael Hansen of Consumers Union made the startling claim that CJD is routinely misdiagnosed as Alzheimer's Disease. CJD Voice founder Liz Armstrong chimed in next, suggesting that this would mean CJD is much more common than science currently accepts. It is nearly impossible that these individuals just wandered into the limelight offered by the mass media. A PR war is clearly being waged. However innocent and laudable it may be that individuals band together in support groups, especially for compassionate and humanitarian purposes, turning a casual association into a media presence requires professional public relations support.

Trust us — we're experts! To those who keep a watchful eye on American environmental activism, the individuals and organizations driving the mad cow scare in the United States are familiar ones. Environmental Media Services (EMS) has been involved in much of the media and public relations activities. In order to build up its public *bona fides*, EMS promoted a May 2000 conference of the U.S. CJD Foundation, giving special notice to the CJD victims and their families. The victims, after all, are needed by reporters to justify the stories they write. EMS also distributed information about the McEwen lawsuits beginning on the day of their filing. EMS has consistently promoted four (and only four) people as "experts" available for interviews and quotable comments. These are all, in fact, activists themselves. The list includes Michael Hansen, a Consumers Union (CU) researcher; John Stauber, an anti-technology activist and author of *Mad Cow U.S.A.*; Thomas Pringle, an oft-quoted Oregon environmental activist; and Joseph Mendelson, the legal director for the activist International Center for Technology Assessment (ICTA), which operates the Center for Food Safety.

Mainstream news sources routinely present these "experts" without giving readers any hint about their backgrounds or agendas. For instance, the *New York Times* has identified Dr. Thomas Pringle as "a biochemist," an "independent researcher," and "a national expert on mad cow disease." A more complete biography would include Pringle's work history with two Oregon environmental groups, and that he is a self-described environmental activist and a strict vegan who eats only organic foods. In addition to the *Times*, *USA Today* has also repeatedly quoted Hansen, Stauber, and Pringle in various combinations.

The Bigger Picture. The campaign to ignite a U.S. mad cow panic is in many ways an attack on agricultural technology and a "black marketing" push for organic foods. Many activists have used their fifteen minutes of fame to argue that organic farming should take a front-burner role in ensuring that America's food supply is safe. Organic activist Sheldon Rampton argued this very point when he was interviewed for an August 9, 2000, story in the *San Francisco Examiner*. Asked for advice to consumers who are concerned about mad cow disease, Rampton said bluntly, "Buy organic food whenever possible, because it's grown according to standards that don't involve factory farming."

Rampton should tell this to *The Wall Street Journal*, given its January 2001 article about the history of testing for mad cow disease in Germany. According to the Journal, the first German case of mad cow disease was discovered by Dr. Ulrich Spengler, who was visiting "a small slaughterhouse in Galenburg, in Lower Saxony, that was trying to establish a niche market for *organic* beef" (emphasis added). The conclusion that so-called sustainable and organic methods of raising cattle are equally susceptible is one that Rampton would rather we hear nothing about. But regardless of how these cases are depicted in the American press, they all took place in Europe. *There are no American mad cows.* Dr. Paul Brown of the National Institutes of Health was certain of this on January 7, 2001, when he told CNN: "We don't have mad cow disease. We probably never will have mad cow disease, and therefore it is a non-problem in the United States."

As the anti-meat campaign expands its umbrella, more and more activist groups fit underneath. On December 26, 2000, the *Christian Science Monitor* said this: "[S]cientists complain that Consumers Union has been scaring people by alleging that rBGH, a genetically engineered hormone [designed] to increase milk production in cows, may spread so-called mad cow disease in America." The normally benign Consumers Union (CU), publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine, employs Michael Hansen in its Consumer Policy Institute.

CU has long opposed using synthetic bovine growth hormones; Hansen, as mentioned earlier, is one of Environmental Media Services' four anointed mad-cow "experts."

Which will have the greater impact on public opinion: the scare tactic, or the voice of reason? When activists put an entire industry in the position of trying to prove a negative, they know that whoever has the burden of proof will lose the public debate. This kind of manipulation is commonplace, and it only serves to elevate radical gossip to the level of conventional wisdom.

Leveraging Fear. Given what we know about the "food police" and their continuing global efforts to frighten us all into eating only what bears their imprimatur, the next stage of the activists' American battle plan should surprise no one. Without substantially disguising their motives, some of the major players in the mad cow scare campaign are drawing bold parallels between mad cow disease and genetically improved foods.

The strategy seems to be to capitalize on one fear in order to incite another. These same activists who have mercilessly trashed the public image of biotech foods (in an endless paean to organic farming) are now using the resulting American fear of these foods to "position" mad cow disease as the next great U.S. health crisis. Consider the following excerpt from the January 2001 issue of *BioDemocracy*, the newsletter of the Organic Consumers Association (OCA):

Commentators have noted for years that the Mad Cow crisis in Europe has been a significant contributing factor fueling opposition to genetically engineered foods. Seeing how industry and government scientists have systematically lied to them about the dangers of feeding animals to animals has made many consumers lose faith in industrial agriculture altogether. Noting that the same government officials who have repeatedly tried to reassure them that the BSE crisis is under control are now saying that genetically engineered foods are safe has brought on a profound skepticism and anger at the grassroots level. Now a similar crisis of confidence may start to develop in the United States as well.

Two paragraphs later, Ronnie Cummins (OCA's president) forecasts the future:

America and the world's 50-year experiment with chemical-intensive industrial agriculture and genetic engineering may soon be moving into its final, terminal stage. Mad Cow Disease and the growing global opposition to factory farming and genetic engineering may turn out to [be] the harbingers of a new era of sustainable living and organic agriculture. One can only hope that we make the necessary transition to organic farming and ban the most dangerous practices of genetic engineering and industrial food production before it is too late.

These examples are illustrative of the overall situation in Europe, one which countless activists would like very much to see repeated in the United States. The activist groups are betting that they can use the "mad deer" scare as a springboard to create an American "mad cow" panic similar to the genuine European one.

A Word of Warning. The American mass media has allowed few details about the European mad cow situation to escape its notice. In recent months, though, an increasing proportion of the coverage seen in the U.S. has begun to focus on the question of whether or not it could happen here. Just the act of directing that question to an activist may betray a reporter's bias, since there is no real evidence to suggest that we are anything but safe.

Americans who consider meat an integral part of their diet or livelihood need to take notice. Although there is no real danger in the U.S., there are plenty of organizations willing to incite panic to further their political agendas. The Big Lie is working in Europe because people are afraid that their food will kill them. If Americans can be convinced to believe the same thing, it will work here too.