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Editor

BSE - on a knife edge again

THE French have single-handedly placed the entire EU beef industry in serious jeopardy. It may be - and hopefully is - too alarmist to say that a 1996 type panic is in danger of re-erupting but the signs at this stage are not encouraging.

The news that the Russians are considering banning beef from an extra three counties in Ireland is another indication of unease, even though we may be justifiably convinced that the problem in Ireland is under control. Our record in this area has stood up to the most rigorous international scrutiny.

A few points need to be made.

France has been the most effective of all member states in convincing their consumers that their national product is the best and safest. The discovery that animals from a herd with a BSE infected animal entered

the food chain has caused consternation.

Beef consumption in France has fallen by 20% and the panic in removing red meats from school menus is reminiscent of the hysteria that gripped Britain. The bickering at the top of the French political system has added to the sense of chaos. President Chirac has called for the removal of all meat and bone meal from all pig and poultry rations - as is the case here and in Britain. Prime Minister Jospin has said the demand is too expensive and impractical at this stage.

Nor surprisingly Germany, always sensitive to a food scare issue, has reacted by some of its states calling for a ban on imports from France. Russia has already banned beef from nine French Depart-

ments.

Britain has taken visible delight in throwing fuel on the French flames in an emotional retaliation for France continuing to flout the EU decision permitting British beef to move freely throughout Europe. But the British gloating is doing damage to the fragile confidence that had been built up among the general British and beef consuming public.

This fragile confidence must, at all costs, be maintained. The sector has suffered too much damage to let it all be undone again.

Immediate moves must be taken at EU level to isolate the French market. An emergency APS scheme, or its equivalent, should be instituted immediately to prevent a catastrophic downward price spiral.

Cow prices have already fallen by at

least 10p a lb. The damage must not be let spread to the rest of the Community.

The irony is that we have never had a beef industry with such exemplary traceability and safety checks. Under the new factory random checking, not one single case of BSE has been detected in Ireland and about four times as many heads are submitted for analysis for each reactor found.

The incidence in Britain is falling dramatically. Handled sensibly and decisively there should be no reason for price declines.

But we need leadership, principally from Brussels and the French need to be told to implement whatever rules are necessary to restore consumer and foreign customer confidence.