April 20, 2004

Dear Secretary Veneman:

We urge you to reconsider your decision to prohibit Creekstone Farms from voluntarily testing all of the cattle it processes for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

There is continued scientific uncertainty over the pathogenesis of BSE in cattle. USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service has acknowledged those uncertainties, noting that the agent that causes BSE and other TSEs “has yet to be fully characterized,” and that the “distribution and amount of the BSE agent in cattle infected with BSE is not known with certainty.”\(^1\) The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) believes that USDA must strengthen its BSE surveillance. It should: 1) test cattle of any age showing signs of central nervous system diseases or are downers; 2) test all cattle 30 months and older that are in the high-risk category, and 3) conduct random sampling of healthy animals over 20 months. Only in this way can USDA determine the true prevalence of BSE in this country and assess the success of existing control measures.

At the same time, USDA should not stand in the way of individual companies who seek to ensure the safety of their beef products for sale in this country and abroad. USDA’s action is a disincentive to companies who want to do more to meet their food safety obligations. In regulating pathogens in meat and poultry products, USDA has never told a company that it could not test for a contaminant in meat. Allowing Creekstone to test all of its cattle for BSE would also establish a precedent that the costs of testing are more appropriately borne by the beef industry, not U.S. taxpayers.

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We urge USDA to act quickly to resolve this problem. It should allow Creekstone Farms and other U.S. beef producers to conduct government-approved BSE tests on beef for American markets and to comply with the safety standards of other countries. USDA also must act to improve the government surveillance program and institute more widespread testing, as described above.

Sincerely,

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Michael F. Jacobson
Executive Director

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Caroline Smith DeWaal
Director, Food Safety

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Karen L. Egbert
Senior Food Safety Attorney