Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
Joint Hearing with Committee on Agriculture
"A Review of USDA's Expanded BSE Cattle Surveillance Program"
July 14, 2004

Good morning, a quorum being present, the Committee on Government Reform will come to order. I would like to welcome the Members of the Committee on Agriculture. I look forward to today's joint hearing on USDA's Expanded BSE Cattle Surveillance Program.

On December 23, 2003, USDA announced for the first time that a cow in the United States had tested positive for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, also referred to as BSE, and more commonly known as "mad cow disease." Most Americans are familiar with mad cow disease as a result of the European epidemic that hit its peak in 1993.

As the Committee charged with overseeing the Federal Government, Government Reform began oversight of USDA's former mad cow surveillance system and an investigation into USDA's handling of the situation surrounding the discovery of the BSE-infected cow. During the initial stages of this investigation, the Committee was presented with information raising significant questions about the validity of USDA's statements regarding its BSE surveillance program.

The Committee was repeatedly told USDA's BSE surveillance program focused on only the high-risk cattle populations where mad cow disease is most likely to be found. The Committee was assured that ONLY downer cattle and cattle suffering from central nervous system symptoms were submitted to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, APHIS, and tested for mad cow disease.

Information obtained by the Committee from USDA confirmed that not only were downer and CNS symptomatic cattle tested for BSE, but ambulatory samples were accepted by APHIS and tested for mad cow disease. Specifically, the facility that slaughtered the BSE-infected cow had submitted ambulatory samples for BSE surveillance with the knowledge and approval of APHIS officials working in Washington State. In addition, USDA's Office of Inspector General has completed an Investigative Report that states ambulatory samples were a part of USDA's mad cow surveillance program. These findings heightened the Committee's concern that USDA lacked internal controls over its BSE surveillance program and the agencies within USDA, as well as over communication between USDA's field staff and officials in Washington.

The miscommunication within USDA was highlighted in May at Lone Star Beef Processors in Texas. Again, due to confusion over proper protocols, a cow diagnosed with central nervous system symptoms was not tested for mad cow disease. As a result, USDA acknowledged a

disconnect between APHIS and the Food Safety and Inspection Service, FSIS, field staff and officials. The Committee was encouraged by the renewed commitment between APHIS and FSIS to rectify the situation and ensure the two entities develop a closer working relationship throughout the BSE surveillance process.

Seven days after the announcement of the BSE-infected cow last December, Secretary Ann Veneman implemented additional safeguards to protect the human food supply from mad cow disease, including a ban on downer cattle, which were previously approved for human consumption. USDA also prohibited the presence of specified risk material in human food. In addition, Secretary Veneman requested the International Review Subcommittee of the Foreign Animal and Poultry Disease Advisory Committee to review USDA's response to the BSE-infected cow and make recommendations to USDA's existing policy on BSE surveillance. These steps, along with the FDA feed ban in place since 1997, illustrate the Federal Government's commitment to the protection of the American food supply.

On March 15, 2004, the Committee was pleased to learn that USDA was expanding its BSE surveillance program and planned to incorporate several of the International Review Subcommittee's recommendations, including a minimum one-year effort to better ascertain the presence of BSE in the U.S. USDA will now sample as many adult cattle from the high-risk population as possible in the 12-18 month time frame, as well as a random

sampling and testing of 20,000 apparently healthy cattle aged 30 months and older.

The expanded BSE surveillance plan reached full implementation on June 1, 2004. The expanded plan is an enormous step to assess whether BSE is actually present in the U.S. cattle population and if so, at what level. We are here today to discuss the expanded surveillance plan, its implementation, and receive feedback as to how the initial stages are working. We expect small hiccups, as this is a massive undertaking for USDA. However, given the pro-active measures our government has taken since 1997, I am confident that we will not be faced with the same mad cow epidemic that plagued Europe.

The Committee on Government Reform will continue to conduct oversight of USDA's BSE surveillance program moves forward. I would like to thank the Committee's Ranking Member, Henry Waxman, for his efforts on USDA oversight and Chairman Goodlatte and the Committee on Agriculture for holding this joint hearing. I would also like to thank our witnesses for their participation today, and look forward to their testimony. I would especially like to thank USDA Secretary Ann Veneman for her participation.