

The Traceability Team

The confirmation in December 2003 of a case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad cow disease) in the United States thrust traceability to the forefront of the public consciousness. It was the first time many Americans had ever heard of the concept of tracking foods, food ingredients, and food animals as they move from farms to processing to markets to consumers' plates.

For the ERS Traceability Team, whose members are experts in food labeling, food safety, biotechnology, commodity markets, and international trade, traceability is far from an unknown concept. Team members have been researching and analyzing different aspects of traceability for the last few years. Their early efforts examined traceability as it relates to genetically engineered crops, foods, and food ingredients.

The team includes: Elise Golan and Fred Kuchler of the Food and Rural Economics Division; and Linda Calvin, Barry Krissoff, and Kenneth Nelson of the Market and Trade Economics Division. Team members authored the new traceability briefing room on the ERS website, www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/traceability/, and several related reports, including *Traceability in the U.S. Food Supply: Economic Theory and Industry Studies*, *Economics of Food Labeling*, and *Country-of-Origin Labeling: Theory and Observation*. Two articles in this issue of *Amber Waves* are drawn from this body of work.

In their recent traceability report, the researchers found that, for the most part, the food industry is successfully developing and maintaining traceability systems to meet changing objectives, though the speed and success of industry responses have varied. Their analysis suggests that Government efforts to improve the Nation's traceback capabilities should focus on providing firms with incentives to strengthen their safety and traceability systems without dictating any specific process for doing so.

Up next for team members: an expansion of their traceability research into other hot-button areas. They will be addressing the role of government in facilitating trade when product safety and/or quality is an issue, exploring the feasibility of animal identification systems, and examining consumer demand for country-of-origin labeling.



Tom McDonald, USDA/ERS

Traceability Team Members (l to r): Kenneth Nelson, Fred Kuchler, Linda Calvin, Elise Golan, and Barry Krissoff