Cow disease boon for ostrich farmer

By SHERRY SAPP
Capitol news bureau

Brian Feeheley's neighbors thought it was a hoot when the former cattle rancher started breeding ostriches in north Louisiana six years ago.

But that was before mad cows and Englishmen.

Today, the first 3,300 pounds of ostrich meat processed by Superior Ostrich of Ringgold will be shipped out of Dallas on its way to Manchester, England, accompanied by John Rigby, an English importer.

Rigby is the British importer who plans to sell about 40,000 pounds of Louisiana ostrich meat in England every month.

Next week another 6,600 pounds of ostrich meat will be shipped.

It turns out the red meat of ostriches is a perfect substitute for beef in a country of beef lovers whose beef industry has been decimated by Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, commonly called "mad-cow disease."

Ostrich meat has a similar flavor and texture and can easily be substituted for beef in recipes.

Louisiana's Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom told the state Senate's Agriculture Committee on Tuesday that the deadly mad-cow disease in England has inadvertently created a phenomenal demand for Louisiana ostrich meat in England.

Rigby, who owns a small ostrich farm in Manchester had already wanted to import ostrich meat before mad-cow disease appeared.

In a telephone interview from north Louisiana, Rigby said people in Great Britain are "frightened to death" of mad-cow disease, which destroys the brains of people who eat the infected beef.

The first 50,000 pounds of the ostrich meat has already been spoken for, Rigby said.

"All I know is that 40 to 60 times a day for about six months, the phone rang from people who wanted to buy ostrich meat," Rigby said. "My wife and I had to leave the house to hide from the telephone."

The price for the meat will be comparable to buying any gourmet type meat or fish, such as alligator tail or lobster.

In England, the meat will be sold to pubs, restaurants and two supermarket chains in the British Isles.

Superior Ostrich currently has about 600 birds breeding or still growing and another 200 to 500 for processing — but the farm still can't keep up with demand, Feeheley said.

"There's never enough of it," said Feeheley, who is marketing director for Superior Ostrich Co.

The breeding-processing farm has an arrangement with a farm in North Carolina to supply additional ostriches, Feeheley said.

Typically, one adult ostrich will provide from 85 to 100 pounds of meat, Feeheley said.

For the time being, Superior Ostrich is the only place from which ostrich meat can be legally imported to England, Rigby said.

Others could do it, but the certifications required by England and the United States are complicated, lengthy processes, Rigby said.

It took 12 months to acquire the necessary approvals from both the United States Department of Agriculture and the British Ministry for Fisheries and Food, Rigby said.

No more than about 10 processors in the United States so far have met the criteria for the USDA label, Feeheley said.

And Rigby said he is the only importer so far who has been certified by the British government to import ostrich meat.

Other countries, such as South Africa, which also have ostrich farms and processors, are unable to meet the stringent standards for the British MAFF approval for import, Rigby said.