FINDING SOLUTIONS

AU professor's test may curb mad cow

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It's not easy spending hours in a room that sometimes smells like manure, but an Auburn University professor's work with rank-scented meat and bone meal may help to stop the spread of mad cow disease.

Tung-Shi Huang, an AU assistant professor of food science, is developing a test to determine whether animal feed contains impurities that might spread the disease. To do so, he's spent years working with the meat and bone meal now banned by the Food and Drug Administration. In 1997, the FDA hoped to safeguard against mad cow by prohibiting the use of meat and bone meal from dead ruminants — cows, goats and sheep — in the feed of live ruminants.

Huang's test isn't an entirely new concept, but it may work with a higher degree of accuracy that helps the FDA to better enforce its standards.

"We can tell if there's beef in the feed right now," said Jean Weese, an AU associate professor of food science.

The process Huang has been developing for about 10 years works a lot like a pregnancy test. He extracts an antibody from organs in mice that will react when exposed to an antigen like the protein found in mad cow-infected tissue. If the reaction occurs, Huang can tell if the feed contains meat, bone or anything else that shouldn't be in there.

And the test works for a number of other purposes. Any substance with protein in it can be tested, which is as useful to a restaurant-goer as it is to the Centers for Disease Control.

Curious about what's really in the catch of the day? "He can tell you whether it's red snapper or not to see if you're being ripped off," Weese said.

What he can't tell yet, however, is whether specific animal parts like brain and spinal cord are in the feed. In the wake of the first mad cow case in the United States, determining whether those parts are in feed is of increased interest. Brain and spinal cord are thought to be the primary means by which the ailment is transferred.

A test that could accurately determine the presence of particular parts, Weese said, might lead to the easing of FDA restrictions. The FDA has basically been forced to throw the baby out with the bath water to ensure safety, Weese said.

"It's a lot of waste," she said.

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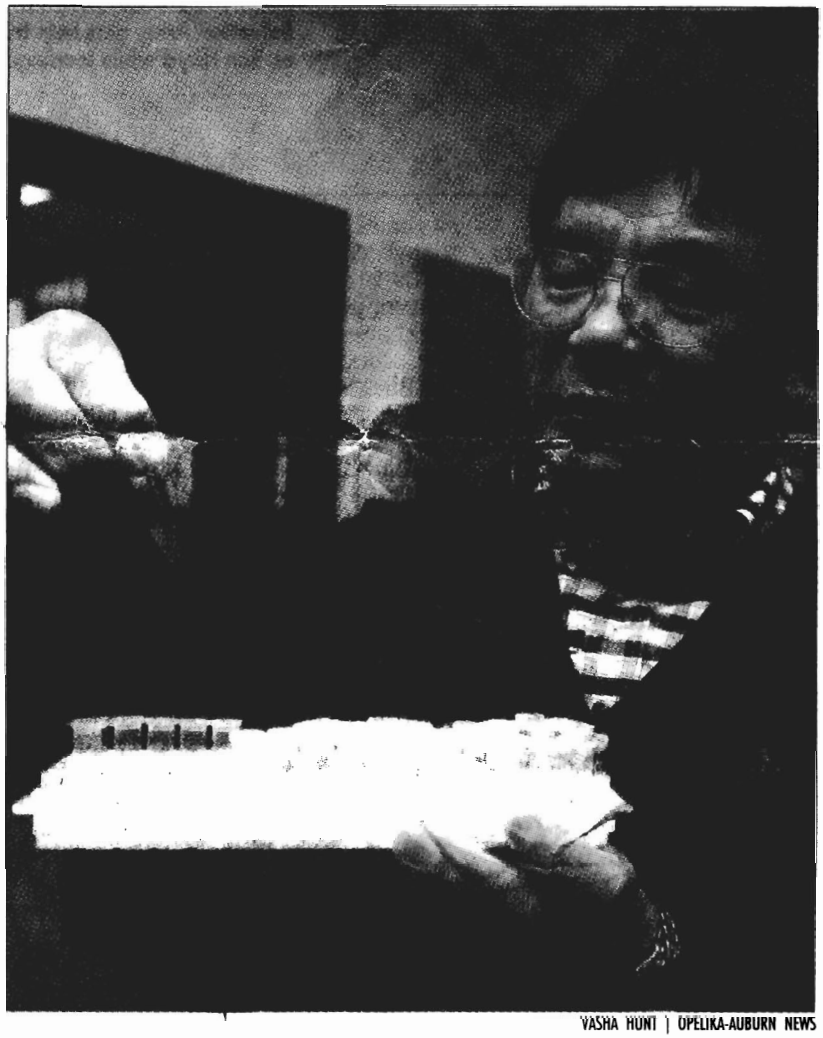

YASHA HUNT | OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS

Auburn University Assistant Professor Tung-Shi Huang shows some of the raw materials he is using in the process of developing a test for animal proteins on cattle feed.

THE HUMAN FACTOR Auburn University Associate Professor Jean Weese discusses Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a terminal human condition some say may be spread from mad-cow infected meat. **THURSDAY.**

MAD COW: *Test could curb disease*

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"We have to throw that (meat) into a garbage can."

Some Americans, Weese added, are simply hyper-sensitive to the idea of grinding up animal parts and feeding it back to cattle. But Weese says it's not a process that should be all too unfamiliar to the average carnivore.

"You grind up chicken when you eat it," she said, "but people don't want to think about it that way."