

Canadian Press (July 12, 2005)

## **\$8 billion mad cow disaster blamed on Canadian Food Inspection Agency**

BY DENNIS BUECKERT

OTTAWA (CP) - Canada's \$8-billion mad cow disaster can be squarely attributed the failure of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to assess economic consequences of even a single infection, says a leading expert.

William Leiss of the University of Ottawa, who is also a past president of the Royal Society of Canada, said the CFIA assessed the risk of mad cow to animal health and human health, but not the risk of losing export markets.

Yet Canada was party to an international agreement providing for a ban on exports from any country with even a single case of the disease. The policy was known as "one cow and you're out."

"What would be the economic impact of one or just a few cases of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in the Canadian herd?" Leiss asked at a World Health Organization conference on risk management.

"We failed completely to manage or even to recognize this risk at our great cost."

He said Canada followed U.S. policies in adopting a minimal testing program. But Canada's risk profile is completely different from that of the United States.

At the time, Canada exported 75 per cent of beef production while the United States exported only 10 per cent. Losing export markets was not a serious problem for the Americans, he said.

"In food issues we are cursed with the political attitude that we've just got to be onside with the U.S. and nothing else matters."

He said the CFIA also followed the U.S. lead in making a half-hearted effort to stop recycling infected protein in ruminant food, which is widely believed to be the cause of mad cow disease.

Leiss said the CFIA ban on feeding proteins from ruminants to ruminants remains "full of holes."

Leiss said the United States conducted a full risk assessment in 1997-98, but Canada did not do one until six years later.

CFIA spokesman Marc Richard said the agency didn't include economic consequences in its assessment because that is not the agency's mandate.

"We don't usually address the economic stuff," said Richard in an interview.

"The risk assessment was based strictly on the disease. Overall we're the administrators of the Animal Health Act.

"The CFIA's risk assessments have to do with animal disease. That is our mandate and in our mandate we specifically don't address economics."

But another CFIA official, senior veterinarian Darcy Undseth, said economic consequences of a mad cow infection in Canada were considered in a 2002 risk assessment even though they were not quantified.

He said the consequences were described in that assessment as "extreme."

Undseth said the CFIA's response was "very successful because of the proactive steps taken since 1990 and the very measured response taken in a North American context.

"BSE has not established and amplified in North America but was captured on its way to eradication."

Asked about the estimated \$8 billion in economic losses to date, Undseth said animal diseases do have economic impact but the BSE response "has been a successful program."