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Canada confirms its 5th case of mad-cow disease

WASHINGTON/VANCOUVER -- Canada confirmed its fifth case of mad-cow disease, creating more problems for a domestic beef industry that has lost billions of dollars because of the livestock illness. Tests on samples from a 6-year-old dairy cow from British Columbia confirmed the presence of the brain-wasting disease, clinically known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency said Sunday. No part of the animal entered the human or animal food chain, the federal agency said.

"We really need a thorough investigation to prevent people from thinking the worst before the facts are in," Rod Scarlett, 47, executive director of Wild Rose Agricultural Producers, an Alberta farm lobby group, said in a telephone interview.

The Bank of Montreal estimated in November 2004 that the domestic livestock industry had lost C\$5 billion (US\$4.34 billion) because of mad-cow disease, due to lost exports and lower prices created by a glut of animals. Exports of live cattle, which totaled C\$1.83 billion in 2002, fell to zero in 2004, according to Statistics Canada, the national statistical agency. The latest infected cow was identified through Canada's BSE surveillance program, which has tested about 100,000 high-risk animals since 2003.

"The detection of only five animals within this high-risk population over the past three years and the age of the animals detected supports the conclusion that the level of BSE in Canada is very low and declining," the inspection agency said in the statement.

U.S. agriculture officials have been invited by Canada to participate in the investigation of the latest case, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said today in an e-mailed statement. Discovery of the infected cow may slow negotiations between the two countries to allow Canadian exports to the U.S. of cattle more than 30 months of age, Scarlett said. Cattle younger than that are considered low risk.

Like the cow found with BSE in Alberta in January, the newest case was in an animal born after a 1997 ban on feeding ground-up cattle parts back to cattle, which scientists say spreads the disease. The animal may have been infected by "cross-contamination" from poultry or swine feed to which cattle tissue had been added as a protein source, Cornelius Kiley, a veterinarian with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, told reporters April 13 on a conference call.

Canadian farmers have filed a lawsuit seeking more than C\$20 billion in damages from the federal government and Ridley Inc., which manufactures livestock feed, alleging that they failed to prevent the mad-cow disease outbreaks in Canada by waiting too long to ban cattle parts in cattle feed.

The newest infection brings to eight the number of confirmed BSE cases in North America -- five in Canada and three in the U.S. One of the U.S. cases involved an animal born in Canada. For both countries, the discovery of the initial case prompted scores of trading partners to suspend beef imports.

The U.S. restored most of its beef trade with Canada by August 2003, and allowed Canada to ship younger cattle across the border last July, after a U.S. court found that Canadian cattle posed little risk of spreading BSE. The disease has a fatal human form blamed for about 150 deaths in the U.K., where BSE surfaced in the 1980s. Between July 18 and the end of 2005, U.S. cattle feedlots bought 210,814 young animals for fattening from Canadian ranchers, and U.S. processors purchased 310,241 head of cattle for slaughter, according to USDA figures. Live cattle trade is worth about C\$1.26 billion a year, the USDA said.

Shares of Springdale, Arkansas-based Tyson Foods Inc., the world's biggest beef and poultry producer, have fallen 22 percent in the past year as some export markets remained closed to U.S. beef and as demand for poultry meat fell because of the spread of avian flu. Tyson dropped 2 cents on April 13 to US\$13.08. Cattle futures on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on April 13 fell 0.375 cent to 75.275 cents a pound. Futures have fallen 11 percent from a year ago, on expectations for larger cattle supplies in the U.S. and on weak beef export demand. They are down 17 percent from Dec. 23, 2003 (90.675 cents a pound), when the U.S. found its first BSE case.

A new Canadian BSE case, "should have no impact on cross-border cattle trade" with the U.S., Stephens Inc. analyst Farha Aslam, who covers Tyson, said April 13. The two countries have protocols in place to take into account new cases of BSE, she said.