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Mad-cow ban on Brazil a 'ruse,' scientists say

Federal experts say politics, not safety, prompted Ottawa to halt beef imports

BY MARK MACKINNON, OTTAWA

Canada's controversial ban on Brazilian beef is a ruse motivated by politics and a trade war rather than health concerns, two senior Health Canada scientists say.

In interviews with *The Globe and Mail*, they said there is no sustainable argument for singling out Brazilian beef products ahead of those imported from other countries. One of them added that the ban was decided upon by managers without consulting the scientists who actually study the beef.

"There was no consultation with us, the scientists," said a senior scientist close to the file who asked not to be named. "Brazilian beef poses no danger that we know of. No more than any other country. Why not Australia, Argentina, India or any other country we import beef from? Why is Brazil picked on? It's the trade war."

Last week, Canada banned Brazilian beef products, citing a "theoretical risk" that they could be contaminated with mad-cow disease. While Brazil has never had a case of the disease, Canada had one in 1993.

In fact, some experts say Brazilian beef is among the safest in the world, because many of its herds have been grass-fed since as far back as 1983. Mad-cow disease, technically known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is spread through feeding animals parts of dead animals. The practice was legal in Canada until 1997.

"What happened with the Brazilian beef was, in my opinion, a ruse," the senior scientist said.

"They already had a fight going on with Brazil because of the plane thing and the WTO. They felt they may as well hit Brazil with this, since we don't import very much beef from them anyway."

He said Health Canada also ben-

efits from the perception that it is taking action to counter the spread of mad-cow disease.

Margaret Haydon, a Health Canada scientist once reprimanded for speaking out about internal pressures to approve a controversial bovine growth hormone, also said she believes the ban has nothing to do with health concerns.

"In my opinion, I don't think there's any difference (in risk) between Brazilian beef and Canadian beef. With the aircraft dispute, it's more a political move than a health

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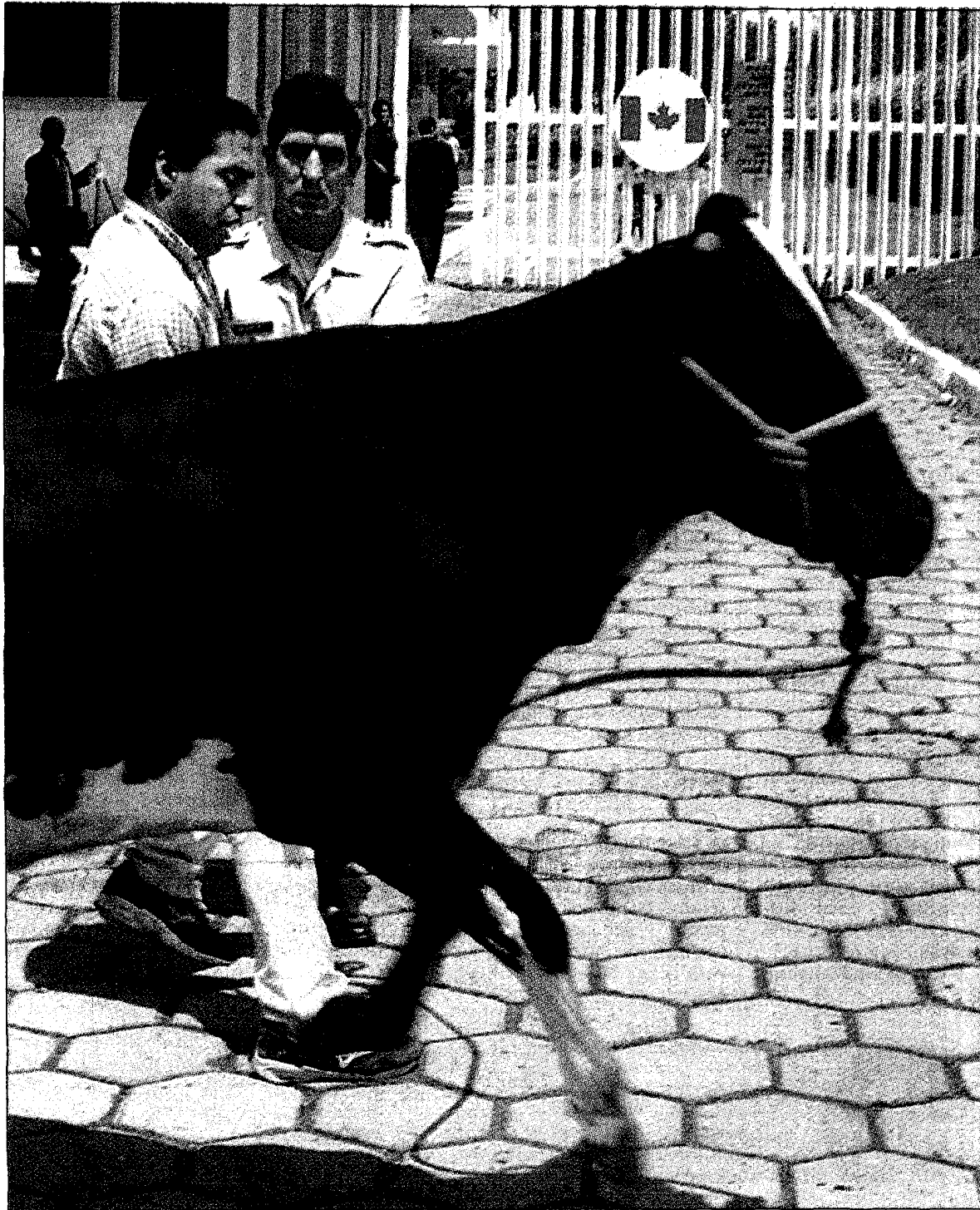
one for the Canadian government."

The ban has sparked an uproar in Brazil, which believes the move is related to a continuing trade dispute between the two countries over subsidies to Montreal-based jet maker Bombardier Inc. and its Brazilian rival Embraer SA.

The affair has made Canada a target of resentment in the South American country. Restaurant owners have begun displaying signs advertising that they don't sell dumping food, and have been dumping Canadian whisky out by the bottle.

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ERALDO PERES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A military police officer stops a protester near the Canadian embassy in Brasilia yesterday. Demonstrators opposed to Ottawa's ban on imported Brazilian beef tried to present a cow to the ambassador.

Beef ban angers Brazil

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Brazilian politicians are considering blocking the import of Canadian goods, and are talking about backing out of a proposed free-trade agreement of the Americas because of the ban and the aircraft dispute. Brazil is also considering suing Canada at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Protesters in Brasilia delivered a cow to the Canadian embassy yesterday and offered to barbecue it to prove it safe. The embassy's business attaché, Jose Herran-Lima, said he would hold off on the barbecue until Canada is sure Brazil is free of mad-cow disease.

Industry Minister Brian Tobin, embroiled in the Brazil file since he announced \$2-billion in new subsidies to Bombardier last month, said yesterday that the trade dispute and the beef ban aren't connected.

"I think it's important the people of Brazil appreciate that. It's purely a food issue, purely a safety issue."

While Canada only imports about \$10-million worth of Bra-

zilian beef annually, most of it canned, the ban has been damaging. The United States and Mexico, Canada's free-trade partners, were obliged to follow suit, though both have since announced they're reviewing the ban.

Michael McBain, the national coordinator for the Canadian Health Coalition, said that if Canada was serious about cracking down on BSE, it would have introduced much broader measures than simply targeting Brazilian beef. He pointed out that according to Statistics Canada, Canada imported 2.8 million kilograms of meat products between 1996 and 2000 from European countries known to have mad-cow outbreaks.

"This move against Brazil has no credibility whatsoever as a health measure. They picked a country way down the risk list — you can't get safer meat," he said. "All the evidence points to this being a trumped-up pretext."

With a report from Agence France-Press