

# New case of mad cow confirmed, U.S. to send team to investigate

By Dennis Bueckert

OTTAWA (CP) - Federal officials have confirmed Canada's second case of mad cow disease in 10 days - a development that could threaten American plans to reopen the border to Canadian beef.

They say it's no threat to human health, but unlike the case confirmed last week, this infected cow was born after feed precautions were put in place in 1997 to prevent further spread of the disease.

That has U.S. agriculture authorities concerned; they are sending a team to Canada to evaluate the case before deciding whether to change their plan to resume the cross-border cattle trade.

"We remain confident that the animal and public health measures that Canada has in place to prevent BSE, combined with existing U.S. domestic safeguards, provide the utmost protections to U.S. consumers and livestock," said Ron DeHaven of the U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

"However, since this animal was born shortly after the implementation of Canada's feed ban, and to determine if there are any potential links among the positive animals, we will expedite sending a technical team to Canada to evaluate the circumstances surrounding these recent finds."

Opposition to dropping the cattle ban has been building in the U.S. since the discovery Jan. 2 of a second mad cow case in Canada. The first was discovered in December 2003 and that's when the U.S. border was closed.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency announced Tuesday that it had confirmed the third case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), this time in an Alberta beef cow just under seven years of age.

That means the animal was born after 1997 regulations intended to eliminate infectious materials from cattle feed.

Officials said no part of the animal has entered the human food or animal feed systems.

Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell insisted Canada's food is safe, and suggested the Alberta cow was infected by feed left over after the 1997 ban was implemented.

"This is not unexpected," he told a news conference. "Although this animal was born after the feed ban was put in place preliminary information indicates the likely source is contaminated feed. This will be the focus of our investigations."

But critics say the latest infection shows that the 1997 feed restrictions were inadequate, and should have included a complete ban on feeding animal parts to animals.

"This is a complete disaster," said Shiv Chopra, one of three Health Canada scientists fired last year after denouncing the 1997 feed restrictions as inadequate.

"What does it take to stop feeding animals to animals?"

The 1997 rules banned cattle meat-bone meal from cattle feed but allowed the continued use of cattle blood, milk, and gelatin and parts from other animals such as pigs and horses.

"They're still feeding cows to cows and lies to the public," said Mike McBane of the Canadian Health Coalition.

Finance Minister Ralph Goodale said the federal government is prepared to do what it can to further help farmers hit by the BSE crisis, based on what the agriculture minister recommends. "We have indicated that we stand ready to support farmers," Goodale said before a Tuesday cabinet meeting.

Dennis Laycraft of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association supported the theory that the cow was probably infected by pre-1997 feed. Such infection happened in Europe after similar feed bans were enacted, he said.

Laycraft said new cases are inevitable, given Canada's current intensive level of testing. About 7,000 cattle are being tested each month, almost three times the target number.

Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister Mark Wartman said he doesn't expect the new case to prevent reopening of the U.S. border. "U.S. reactions will be mixed depending on what group you are talking to," Wartman said. "We anticipate that the U.S. will continue to move ahead."

Mitchell said an international team of experts will be invited to inspect Canada's system, as a confidence-boosting measure.

That measure was welcomed by Arno Doerksen, head of the Alberta Beef Producers Association. "I think it's very important we continue to build international confidence in our system. I think the fact that he's going to be bringing in observers from our trading partners is important."

Laycraft called Tuesday's news another twist in the BSE "rollercoaster."

"It just wears heavily on everyone in the industry right now."

The U.S. has been slowly allowing more beef products into the country and is set to lift the import ban in March. The ban has cost the Canadian beef industry an estimated \$5 billion.

Officials warned that more BSE cases are expected, but the number of cases is expected to be small and will likely fade as older animals most at risk for the disease die or are culled from herds.

World Health Organization guidelines allow for a certain number of BSE cases even in minimal-risk countries. Under those guidelines, Canada could have 11 cases of mad cow during a consecutive 12-month period and still be considered a minimal risk country.

BSE has no cure or vaccine. Humans who eat infected meat products can develop a variant known as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a fatal brain-wasting illness.

Since the BSE surveillance program was enhanced in January 2004, Canada has tested more than 24,000 high-risk cattle.