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Guess who's playing mad-cow roulette?

By Barbara Simpson

The government and the media pulled another fast one. I'm talking about Mad Cow Disease.

While we're diverted by the tsunami, the Democrat election challenge, the attack on Alberto Gonzales and efforts to be nicer to terrorists, the American food supply is threatened and may well be seriously compromised.

The horror is that no one is paying attention, and those who have, have bought into the official line: "Everything is OK, we're taking care of it."

I'm from the government and I'm here to help you. Right.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture last Monday, Americans don't have to worry about eating Canadian beef, because, we're told in all seriousness, the food safety rules of both countries "provide the utmost protections."

Why did we need that reassurance? Because on Sunday, Jan. 2, Canada confirmed its second case of mad cow disease – Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy.

Uh Oh.

No one in the USDA, the Commerce Department or the Bush administration wanted to hear that because just four days before that, on Dec. 29, the USDA announced that our border will reopen to Canadian beef on March 7. It means we can again import Canadian beef products and cattle younger than 30 months old.

That decision is based on World Health Organization guidelines. Hmmm.

Our border has been closed to such imports since May 2003, when the first case of Canadian Mad Cow Disease was reported. Political battles have raged since then, to get rid of the ban. There's a lot at stake. Seventy percent of Canadian beef is exported to the United States – that's more than \$1.5 billion annually.

The news of the January Mad Cow case hit our media and was reported, as were the reassurances of the government agencies charged with protecting not only the integrity of the U.S. food supply, the health of American consumers, but also the safety of the American beef industry.

Were they worried? Nah. They assured us all is OK. The media repeated it – press releases are great. Oh, and by the way, the administration also said it will stand by its decision to reopen the border.

Why? Because it has confidence consumers and the industry are protected in both countries.

Funny, about that. Just days before, the Vancouver Sun (that's a Canadian newspaper, folks) revealed it had obtained internal documents from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The documents show the Canadian government, early in 2004, conducted secret tests on cattle feed to see whether rules prohibiting animal tissue from being used in cattle feed were being followed.

The results are shocking. More than half the feed contained animal parts not listed on the label. Of 70 feed samples labeled "vegetable only," 59 percent contained "undeclared animal materials."

Canadian manufactured feed was the worst. Seventy-one percent of the samples had undeclared animal protein in them. Of imported samples, just under half did. There are about 550 commercial feed mills in Canada, CFIA found several hundred of those mills violated federal regulations. They don't even know what kind of animals the protein came from!

Michael McBane, the national coordinator for the Canadian Health Coalition, says "It demonstrates the fact that the feed ban is basically meaningless."

Attention, USDA: You missed something.

Sergio Tolusso, CFIA feed program coordinator says compliance is critical in preventing the spread of BSE, but admits they have no idea of how much feed contains animal remains.

President Bush and the USDA: Meet Sergio Tolusso and Michael McBane.

This isn't food-nut, scare tactics. BSE is a fatal cattle disease, found also in sheep, goats, swine, poultry and game. It attacks the nervous system, eating holes in the brain and killing the animal.

People who eat infected meat can contract the human form of BSE, called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. It eats away the brain, reduces the person to senility and kills. Since first identified in England in 1986, there have been more than 180,000 cases. But it can't be diagnosed until an autopsy is done and it takes years to develop. The danger is easy to ignore.

BSE originates with a protein called a prion that exists in the brain, spinal cord and other nervous system tissue. It's virtually indestructible. It can't be killed by any means we know, surviving all known decontamination methods including the highest temperatures.

BSE is totally preventable. Stop feeding animals to animals. It's done by feedlots to save money – slaughterhouse scraps extend animal feed. Unscrupulous feed companies play the game. It all comes down to money.

It's appalling that our government is willing to play Mad Cow roulette with our health.

It's no comfort for the government to say we can feel safe eating Canadian beef. There's no way to know. Every effort to label food products with the country of origin has been beaten back by internationalists and proponents of open border-world trade, who care only about profits and nothing about public health. The American cattle ranchers have been fighting for such labeling only to be ridiculed in Washington and ignored in the media. It's disgusting.

The government is wrong to resume trade with Canada and the U.S. media have shown – again – they are only interested in reprinting or reporting the official line. They'd rather scare us with global-warming stories based on speculation than tell us the truth about a potentially deadly situation.

For our media to miss (or ignore) a story of this magnitude just across our border is shameful. I've followed the story of feed contamination for months and it happens in this country, too. It's been covered regularly by a little weekly newspaper out of Montana called "Agri-News, The Best in the West." Editor Linda Grosskopf has the guts to tell it like it is. That's what media used to do.

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Toronto Star (January 11, 2005)

Lagging on the health front

The latest mad cow discovery is treated not as a potential health threat but mainly as an economic threat to ranchers

BY THOMAS WALKOM

When Canada's first homegrown case of mad cow disease was discovered two years ago, we were told not to worry — that it was just one cow.

When the second case was found later that year, this time in a Canadian-born U.S. cow, we were again advised not to fret. This one, we were told, counted on the U.S. side of the ledger.

Then, earlier this month, when a third Canadian cow was found stricken with mad cow disease (technically known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE) we were told that, really, there was still no problem.

This time we were told that in spite of its earlier just-one-cow assurances, the federal government had always expected more cases of BSE to crop up.

True, cattle raised on the same Alberta ranch as the latest diseased cow may well have been eaten by humans, an official with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency conceded to the Edmonton Journal.

Nonetheless, federal officials said, the chance of any human contracting variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), a fatal brain-wasting condition caused by eating mad-cow meat, remains remote.

"From a public health perspective, this finding does not threaten the safety of Canadian beef," insisted Federal Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell.

All of which is accurate — in a statistical sort of way. Even Britain, perhaps the country most affected by mad cow disease, did not suffer a public health disaster. Only about 135 Britons have died so far from the variant of brain wasting disease linked to mad cow disease — and that in a nation of 60 million.

So it's correct that eating beef is not as risky statistically as, say, smoking cigarettes. Still, the Canadian government's response to this whole thing seems somehow inadequate.

Ottawa insists on treating mad cow disease as a purely economic issue. Thus, the latest incident is treated not as a potential health threat to those who eat beef but as a potential economic threat to Canadian ranchers.

Curiously, much of the news media seem to be moving in lockstep with the government here. Most media stories focus exclusively on the trade impact of mad cow disease.

The theme of the coverage goes something like this: unscrupulous U.S. ranchers, anxious to protect their profits, will use the latest case as an excuse to pressure their government to keep the border closed to Canadian cattle — thus hurting virtuous Canadian ranchers.

All of which has some truth. This is in part a trade story. But only in part.

It is also a public health story — perhaps not as immediately dramatic as some (it can take years for vCJD to make itself evident in humans), but a public health story nonetheless.

Otherwise, why would anyone care at all?

Ottawa has moved swiftly to subsidize faltering ranchers hurt by the swift (and understandable) reluctance of consumers in nations such as Japan to eat beef that just might wither their brains.

But on the health front, the federal government has consistently lagged. Bowing to pressure from the ranching and meat-packing lobbies, Ottawa has been shockingly lackadaisical about ensuring the safety of the beef system.

Even after the first homegrown case of mad cow was found, the federal government moved with agonizing slowness. It has still not followed Britain's sensible lead and banned the practice of feeding dead cows to pigs and chickens (the problem here is that these animals may then be ground up in turn and fed back to cattle).

Canada did announce in July that it wouldn't let farmers feed so-called high-risk parts of dead cattle, such as spinal cords, to animals like pigs and chickens. But it took another six months to put these new regulations on paper. And even now, they are still not implemented. Rather they are being sent around for discussion.

The government has expanded its BSE inspection program. Yet it still remains woefully inadequate.

While the Japanese inspect every dead cow for BSE, Canada now looks at only about 20,000 a year—out of a cattle population of 5 million.

Even here, the government relies on farmers to volunteer their cattle for testing, with a bounty program that pays \$225 a head.

That might catch ancient wheezers that are about to be destroyed anyway (that's apparently how this month's case was discovered). But it will not catch younger cows in which the disease is not yet evident.

Again the reason for Ottawa's reluctance to test has to do with money. Ranchers and meat packers worry that serious testing will raise their costs to levels that consumers are unwilling to pay. And perhaps they are right.

So we wait. Not for the next episode of mad cow disease— that is already old news. We wait for the first homegrown case in which a Canadian's brain is wormholed by vCJD. Perhaps then the government will concede that this is a health problem, too.