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Editorial: The menace of Mad Cow disease is far from over

By Stephen Hume

As the latest plot twist in Canada's mad cow melodrama unfolds, it's worth remembering that this is just the first of the reruns.

That's because bovine spongiform encephalopathy is likely now established in the North American beef herd. BSE -- the clinical acronym for the malady that eats holes in cows' brains -- has now been transmitted in a variant form to at least 159 humans who ate contaminated meat.

I say "at least" because a British study that tested tonsils and appendixes routinely removed during surgeries and autopsies suggests the disease, which has a long incubation period, might affect as many 120 people per million population in the U.K.

True, only a few human victims have thus far emerged on this side of the Atlantic and it's thought that they were exposed in Europe, not here. Scientists and statisticians note that with only three confirmed cases of BSE in cattle in Canada and one in the U.S., the risk to Canadian and American consumers remains "infinitesimal."

However, perceptions are relative. What's a minuscule margin of risk to a statistician may seem quite a bit larger to a mother contemplating what to feed her toddlers. And I fear it's just a matter of time before more BSE cases present themselves in the beef herds of both Canada and the U.S.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration refers to the World Organization of Animal Health's guidelines for such determinations. They grant minimal risk status if fewer than two cases of BSE per million cattle over 24 months of age occur during each of the previous four years. About 5.5 million cattle in Canada's beef herd of 13.5 million fall into this age cohort. So that means that between now and 2009, more aggressive and effective testing could turn up as many as 44 cases of mad cow disease and we'd still be given a clean overall bill of health by the Americans who provide our biggest export market.

This might be comforting news for the exporters whose losses reached \$11 million per day when international markets closed to Canadian beef after the discovery in May 2003 that a single cow in Alberta was sick with BSE.

Nevertheless, how tolerant will consumers here continue to be if many more cases are found? Particularly if BSE should appear in cattle born since 1997, the year Ottawa finally banned the use of cattle fodder supplemented by protein derived from carcasses unfit for human consumption. In terms of risk assessment and statistical probabilities, the Canadian government points out that the incidence of BSE cases in Canada remains below one in a million.

Critics argue that the one-in-a-million odds are deceptive. In real terms, it's around three in 20,000, since that's how many cows have actually been tested and how many cases have been confirmed.

Of course, cost-benefit models based on similar statistically based risk projections lay behind the decision to permit the continued feeding of Canadian livestock with fodder manufactured from other sick and dead cattle long after such bans were in place in Europe.

Which brings me to the crux of the problem for the industry, which is that the market is not necessarily rational when it comes to deciding what risks are acceptable in the food supply.

What deserves to be remembered is that BSE-related marketing problems for North American beef producers began in the fall of 2001, when Japanese authorities identified a case of BSE in a cow they thought had been infected by contaminated feed imported from Europe.

It proved the first of only nine cases identified in Japan between 2001 and 2003, but there, as in Europe, beef evaporated from consumers' shopping lists. A \$1.2-billion US export market was blindsided. Beef exports spiralled by a third before U.S. producers knew what had hit them. There's no guarantee that future cases of BSE in the Canadian and American herd won't trigger similar flights from beef as a consumer staple here, too.

Which is why everyone should welcome Ottawa's plans to strengthen regulations governing the disposal of slaughtered animal parts associated with BSE and to extend prohibitions against the use of animal protein in animal feed to include both pet food and fodder for any livestock intended for human consumption.

For those prohibitions to mean anything, however, they will have to be accompanied by strict monitoring and ruthless enforcement.

Yet, as The Vancouver Sun's Chad Skelton recently discovered, federal documents confirm that more than half the samples of animal feed labelled vegetable matter it tested were found to include unidentified animal remains.

Almost immediately, I note from a Canadian Press report, two prominent U.S. politicians were asking that the ban on Canadian beef imports be continued on grounds that the inspections reported here by Skelton had found "major non-compliance issues" at seven feed mills and that three were failing to prevent contamination of cattle fodder.

Which brings us back to the original Alberta-born BSE-infected cow. It never entered the human food chain. However, the caucus was processed at a rendering plant and the meat and bone meal were added to pet food and fodder for other livestock and poultry.

A federal investigation tracked the distribution of feed possibly contaminated by its remains.

The reach of that one tainted cow was stunning. The feed went to 1,800 farms. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency did find that 99 per cent of the farms sampled had complied with the ban on feeding their cattle with fodder that contained the remains of other ruminants. But one per cent had not.

Contaminated feed intended for poultry had been fed to cattle which subsequently had to be destroyed.

What about ranchers and feed lot operators who have bought fodder they believe to be strictly vegetable in content when half of it, in fact, may have contained unlabelled, unidentified animal remains?

So the substance of Skelton's reports on contaminated animal feed couldn't be less fortunate. This is just the kind of development that can dramatically undermine an already fragile public confidence in the political will of government and its under-resourcing of food inspection agencies when it comes to public safety. Anybody who doesn't think there's potential here for a shattering paradigm shift in meat consumption should take a closer look at the growth of two trends.

First, a Harris Interactive survey conducted for the Vegetarian Resource Group in 2003 found that the number of people in the U.S. abandoning meat in their diet has grown sixfold since 1999.

Second, Carolyn Dimitri and Catherine Greene of the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in 2002 that retail sales growth in the organic foods market has equalled a stunning 20 per cent per year since 1990.

Just because Canadians and Americans eat a lot of beef now is no guarantee that they always will. If public confidence in the beef supply is to be maintained in the face of more cases of BSE, the industry will have to stop tinkering with regulations, set conservative standards for food safety and demand that government restore to inspection agencies the resources necessary to do their jobs.

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Probe feed rules before lifting cattle ban

By BETH GORHAM

WASHINGTON (CP) - Two U.S. politicians said Wednesday the ban on Canadian cattle shouldn't be dropped until officials investigate whether feed rules are routinely violated north of the border.

In a letter to the man nominated as the next secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Michael Johanns, the two cite what they describe as new information suggesting Canadian companies are flouting rules that ban feeding animal remains to cows.

That practice, considered the primary way mad cow disease is spread, was banned in Canada in August 1997.

U.S. Representative Henry Waxman and Senator Kent Conrad said regulators have discovered animal material in Canadian feed over the last 15 months, issuing import alerts to block products from 17 companies.

Recent inspections have revealed seven Canadian feed mills had "major non-compliance issues" and three were failing to prevent contamination of cattle feed, they said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced last week it intends to drop the 19-month ban on Canadian cattle under 30 months of age, considered at low risk for contracting mad cow or bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

Officials said trade will resume March 7, despite a new Canadian mad cow case discovered last weekend. But the latest case has renewed protectionist sentiments among some U.S. ranchers and politicians.

The decision to allow cattle imports again rested in part on the department's determination Canada's feed ban has been rigorously enforced, said the letter from Waxman and Conrad.

"There is significant evidence that calls these findings into question. This evidence includes a series of import alerts from the Food and Drug Administration, as well as internal Canadian documents," they wrote.

"It is imperative that these issues be thoroughly investigated before authorizing Canadian imports."

The letter noted a December article in the Vancouver Sun newspaper, based on internal documents from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, said tests on cattle feed earlier this year found it contained animal parts not listed in the ingredients.

Canadian officials responded last month, saying there's a high level of compliance with the feed ban.

"People are making the assumption here that this somehow constitutes or represents a risk from the BSE perspective and I don't believe that this is what this information is telling us at all," said Dr. Brian Evans, CFIA spokesman.

The U.S. ban on cattle and beef products, imposed in May 2003 after Canada's first mad cow case, has cost the industry some \$5 billion Cdn.

Attempts to reopen the border were delayed in part by the discovery of BSE in a Washington state cow a year ago.

The USDA, which has been conducting an extensive risk assessment, released a 500-page report last week that declared Canada should be considered a "minimal risk" country.