

# Health Canada ignored its own scientists on mad cow, report says

By Dennis Bueckert, Canadian Press

OTTAWA (CP) Health Canada scientists warned their supervisors last year that proposed measures to curb mad cow disease were inadequate, but the department did not heed the advice, The Canadian Press has learned.

The scientists were also told not to discuss their views outside the government.

Private correspondence within the department reveals sharp dissent on how to respond to Canada's first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE.)

A memo written by scientist Margaret Haydon, with the support of colleagues Shiv Chopra and Gerard Lambert, rejected claims that an infected Alberta cow might be an isolated case.

"BSE is present in Canada and is here to stay, as generally admitted by the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) and others," Haydon wrote to Karen Dodds, director general of Health Canada's food directorate.

Haydon's memo was written after a June 13, 2003 meeting in which officials discussed Canada's first case of homegrown BSE.

She argued that safety measures proposed at the meeting, such as the removal of spinal cords and brains from slaughtered animals, were inadequate to protect public health.

"These are not options for a deadly disease to both human and animals," said the memo.

Brains and spinal cords, referred to as specified risk materials, are considered at highest risk of containing the prions which cause mad cow disease. But scientists say prions can also be present in blood, muscles, and other matter that has been exposed to the high-risk materials.

Haydon's memo said the only effective measure to stop the spread of BSE would be a total ban on the use of dead and rendered animal parts in the feed of other animals.

"In our opinion, this is the only decision which will be effective in safeguarding public health, helping the meat industry and increasing public and international confidence."

In a message of reply, Dodds denied that BSE is "here to stay," saying Canadian controls "are very significant in terms of limiting the possible extent of the disease."

Dodds did not address the issue of banning animal parts from cattle feed, but said "decisions will be based on sound scientific evidence and not on opinions."

Dodds also reprimanded Haydon for sending a copy of her message to a person outside the department.

"We noted at the meeting that the meeting discussion was internal to government of Canada," she wrote. "This limitation should have been respected."

Health Canada official Carole Saindon said Health Canada provides many opportunities for scientists to offer advice, considers that advice and also considers guidelines issued by international agencies.

"Our policies are reviewed on an ongoing basis. All information is shared and taken into account."

Since the exchange of correspondence, Canada has introduced a regulation requiring the removal of high risk materials from cattle at slaughter.

But a second case of BSE has been reported in a Canadian-born cow, resulting in many countries restricting imports of Canadian beef.

Canada currently bans feeding rendered materials from ruminant animals to other ruminants, but allows materials from pigs and chickens to be used in cattle feed.

Critics say there is a risk that of cross-contamination among different types of feed. The European Union has banned the use of any mammalian protein in cattle feed.