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# Officials recognize Mad Cow disease may be here to stay

By DENNIS BUECKERT

Ottawa -- Get used to it: mad cow disease is here to stay.

Government officials would never put it so bluntly, but that's the message implicit in their low-key response to the latest suspected case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Even if the new case is confirmed, it's not expected to delay the announced reopening of the U.S. border to Canadian cattle. That reflects a big change in thinking since May 2003 when the discovery of a single case closed the border.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration was given advance warning of the suspected case and proceeded with the reopening announcement anyway, said Gary Little, a veterinarian with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

"I think it's always been recognized that . . . there would be a small number of additional cases identified," Mr. Little said in an interview Friday.

But government comments in the past left the impression that the risk was virtually nil.

"Risk assessments have consistently determined that the possible presence of BSE could not be excluded, but is negligible," Former Agriculture Minister Bob Speller said last December.

Prime Minister Paul Martin spoke to U.S. President George W. Bush early Friday about the suspected case coming just as the border re-opening was announced.

Mr. Martin sought assurances that the new potential case in Alberta would not mean a re-closure of the U.S. border to Canadian beef imports.

Mr. Bush assured Mr. Martin that his administration is committed to keeping the border open, a Canadian official said.

Michael Hansen, a scientist with the U.S. Consumers Union, says it appears the United States and Canada have made a common decision that a small number of BSE cases are acceptable.

"Normally when any country reports a single case of BSE the U.S. would stop all imports. That's what the global rules of the game are. You would think they would take more precautions not less."

Mr. Hansen said the U.S. commitment to label Canada a "minimal risk" country even if another case is confirmed does not reflect the criteria of the World Organization for Animal Health commonly known by its French acronym OIE.

"They (U.S. officials) do not have a scientific rationale for opening the border."

It appears that the U.S. and Canada may have given up on gaining access to overseas markets, he suggested.

Little strongly denied this, saying talks are underway with Japan, an important market that remains closed.

Mr. Hansen said there are still major loopholes in the U.S. and Canadian precautions with respect to mad cow disease.

An internal CFIA study recently obtained by The Vancouver Sun found that 59 per cent of cattle feed samples labelled as vegetable-only were found to contain "undeclared animal materials.

That raises questions about the effectiveness of the current ban on feeding cattle remains to other cattle, considered one of the most likely routes of disease transmission.

Mr. Hansen also noted that Canadian regulations permit calves to be weaned on whole blood even though it has been demonstrated the disease can be spread through blood.

Little of the CFIA said no cases of blood transmission have been reported.

The news release on the new suspected case was issued at 2:30 a.m. on Thursday morning. Officials say there was no intention to bury the story, the release was simply delayed.

Definitive word on test results is expected within days.

Meat from cattle infected with mad cow disease is considered the prime route of transmission for variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a fatal neurological disorder.

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**UPDATE** -- Unfortunately for Canadians, the results of the test confirmed that Canada does indeed have another case of Mad Cow disease.