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Ottawa roasted for mad-cow response

By Chad Skelton

Consumer groups reacted with shock and outrage Thursday to a report in The Vancouver Sun that Ottawa rejected the advice of its own experts to test 65,000 cattle for mad-cow disease over a one-year period to ensure the disease was not widespread in Canada.

Instead, the government has said it plans to test just 8,000 animals this year for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), increasing to 30,000 annually over the next five years.

"I was absolutely amazed when I read the paper this morning," said Bruce Cran, president of the Consumers' Association of Canada. "It's quite frightening. We feel it's grossly negligent of the government not to have followed its own advice, especially in light of the billions of dollars that have been lost by the industry and concern expressed by consumers."

Internal Canadian Food Inspection Agency documents obtained by The Sun under the Access to Information Act show that experts with the agency argued as early as last summer that the best course of action to determine the size of the BSE problem in Canada was a blitz of testing of 65,000 cattle over 12 months.

In a briefing note to CFIA president Dick Fadden -- titled Enhanced BSE Surveillance : Why does Canada need to test 65,000 cattle? -- Dr. Noel Murray, a senior CFIA veterinarian, argued that "65,000 animals will need to be tested in order to fulfil the objectives of a statistically based, scientifically sound surveillance program and provide an appropriate assurance that the prevalence of BSE in Canada is very low."

But in January, Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister Bob Speller announced the five-year testing plan, starting with just 8,000 animals in 2004.

CFIA said Wednesday the government decided a more moderate increase in testing over a longer period of time would be more effective than a blitz.

"In the final analysis, it was felt we would get a more accurate picture of what the disease incidence was if we maintained a higher level of surveillance for a longer period of time rather than a short-term blitz," said CFIA veterinarian Dr. Gary Little.

Speller was unavailable to comment Thursday.

The decision to ramp up testing was sparked by the discovery of a BSE-infected cow in northern Alberta in May 2003 and of an Alberta-born cow with BSE in Washington State in December.

Since the first case of BSE was found, dozens of countries have imposed bans on the importation of Canadian cattle, costing the beef industry hundreds of millions of dollars.

Dick Proctor, the federal NDP's agriculture critic, said Thursday the best way to encourage countries to reopen their markets to Canadian beef is to increase testing for BSE.

"We should be testing more animals," said Proctor. "If we did that, we could say with some conviction to the Japanese and other countries that are concerned, that our meat is safe."

The documents obtained by The Sun also show that, in a presentation to deputy ministers in October, CFIA staff warned the government that any increase in testing for BSE raised the risk of turning up another infected animal.

"Enhancing the BSE surveillance program means increasing the possibility of finding another case of BSE in Canada," it stated.

The agency argued, therefore, that an "integral part" of any plan to increase testing should also involve a communications strategy to deal with the possible discovery of another infected animal.

The CFIA said Wednesday that fears of finding another infected animal played no role in the government's decision to test fewer cattle.

But Michael McBane, national coordinator of the Canadian Health Coalition, a watchdog group, said he doesn't buy that.

"Their policy is: You don't test, you don't find," McBane said. "Every other country that increased the testing regime found significantly more [infected] cows. They keep saying it's an isolated case. How would we know? We're not testing enough to find out."

The Japanese test all cattle slaughtered in their country and Europeans test all animals over the age of 30 months -- about 25 per cent of all cattle slaughtered.

McBane said his group would like to see Canada test every single animal heading for the food chain.

But at the very least, he said, the government should have gone with the far smaller 65,000 target of its own experts.

"Their own experts gave them a very modest number to test," McBane said. "They've ignored their own experts."

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Ottawa ignored expert advice on halting mad-cow disease

Food agency called for 65,000 tests; 8,000 planned

By Chad Skelton

The federal government rejected the advice of its own experts that the best way to ensure mad cow disease was not widespread in Canada was to conduct a testing blitz of 65,000 cows over a 12-month period, according to documents obtained by The Vancouver Sun.

The documents also reveal that deputy ministers were warned by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in October that any increase in testing for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) would mean "increasing the possibility of finding another case of BSE in Canada."

But one document argued that testing 65,000 cows was necessary to "provide international credibility."

In January, federal Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister Bob Speller announced that Canada would increase the number of cows tested for BSE.

The decision was sparked by the discovery of a BSE-infected cow in northern Alberta in May 2003 and the discovery of an Alberta-born cow with BSE in Washington State in December.

Speller said the government would test at least 8,000 cows in 2004, up from the 5,500 cows in 2003, and that the number of cows tested would increase over the next five years to 30,000 cows a year or more.

But internal documents obtained by The Sun under the Access to Information Act show that experts with the CFIA argued as early as last summer that the best course of action was a blitz of testing over a 12-month period of 65,000 cows.

In a briefing note sent to CFIA president Dick Fadden -- titled Enhanced BSE Surveillance : Why does Canada need to test 65,000 cattle? -- Dr. Noel Murray, a senior CFIA veterinarian, argued that "65,000 animals will need to be tested in order to fulfill the objectives of a statistically based, scientifically sound surveillance program and provide an appropriate assurance that the prevalence of BSE in Canada is very low."

That point was repeated in a presentation to deputy ministers Oct. 2, 2003, in which the CFIA argued that "a sample of 65,000 is necessary to provide international credibility."

Dr. Gary Little, a senior veterinarian with the CFIA, said Wednesday the government decided against the testing blitz because it believed a moderate increase in testing over a longer period of time would be more effective.

"In the final analysis, it was felt we would get a more accurate picture of what the disease incidence was if we maintained a higher level of surveillance for a longer period of time rather than a short-term blitz," he said.

Little said the more moderate increase in testing was always one of the options the CFIA was considering.

However, he couldn't explain why there is no mention of that option in the 147 pages of internal CFIA documents on BSE testing released to The Sun.

The Sun made its request for documents in mid-January, after the government made its announcement.

Little also said the government decided a one-time testing blitz would be logistically difficult.

"A blitz was something we couldn't realistically achieve over the short-term," he said.

However, the CFIA's presentation to deputy ministers in October includes a price tag for just such a blitz.

"CFIA has estimated that the cost to the federal government to test 65,000 High Risk samples in the first 12 months is approx. \$6.7 [million] for equipping and staffing the labs, and cost of rapid tests," the presentation stated.

The presentation to deputy ministers also included a potential downside to ramping up testing.

"Enhancing the BSE surveillance program means increasing the possibility of finding another case of BSE in Canada," it stated.

The agency argued, therefore, that an "integral part" of any plan to increase testing should also involve a communications strategy to deal with the possible discovery of another infected cow.

Little denied that concerns about finding another case of BSE played any role in the government's decision to reject a testing blitz.

Speller was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

Prior to the discovery of a BSE-infected cow in Alberta, Canada was considered a "BSE-free country" by the World Organization for Animal Health, officially known as the Office International des Epizooties (OIE).

However, following the first BSE case last summer, Canada's status changed to that of a "moderate-risk country."

Based on OIE guidelines, Canada is required to establish that the prevalence of BSE among Canadian cows is "less than one in a million" to reach the status of a "minimal-risk country."

Determining such a low rate of the disease through random testing would require Canada to test as many as three million cows over a period of four years, according to a report prepared by the CFIA's Animal Health Risk Assessment Unit last June.

But the report said the CFIA could achieve the same results by testing a smaller number of "high risk" animals, what are known as the "four Ds" -- dead, downers (those unable to walk), dying and diseased (those found in post-mortem inspections to have been sick).

The presentation argued that by testing 65,000 of those cows, the agency could be confident the incidence of BSE in Canada was low.

But the presentation warned that such an approach was difficult because it required tracking down dead and diseased cows -- most of which never enter a slaughterhouse.

"Some [farmers] may be reluctant to notify authorities of dead stock for fear of positive test results," the presentation states.

The CFIA warns some farmers may take what they characterize as a "3-S approach: 'shoot, shovel and shut up.'"

The presentation argued such a blitz might also require the paying of a "bounty" to farmers -- a nominal amount to encourage farmers to notify the CFIA about dead cows.

Other documents indicated the CFIA would have to work more closely with rendering plants to gain access to dead cows during a blitz.

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PRICE OF VIGILANCE

Estimated costs of large-scale testing for mad-cow disease in Canada:

Have head of a dead or non-ambulatory ("downer") cow sent to a central collection point, or go and get it from the farm: \$85-\$370

Per-head cost to set up a lab and have it perform, in first year of operations, 65,000 tests on cows found dead, unable to walk, dying or sick: \$103

Resulting total testing cost per head: \$188-\$473

Source: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada