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BSE-Contaminated Chicken Feed May Have Been Fed to B.C. Cows

By Adrienne Tanner (with files from Canadian Press)

Federal investigators have learned contaminated chicken feed containing remains of an Alberta cow diagnosed with mad cow disease may have been fed to cows on three B.C. hobby farms.

The three farms, one in Prince George and two in the Fraser Valley, are under quarantine, said Cornelius Kiley, a veterinarian with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. It is not yet known if the cows will be destroyed.

Kiley said investigators tracking sales of the tainted feed last week grew concerned about feeding practices on the three farms.

"We do have indications that it could have been fed improperly to the ruminants when it should not have occurred," he said.

Ruminants are animals that chew their cud and include cows, goats, sheep, elk and deer.

In 1997, Canada outlawed feeding cows the remains of cattle or other ruminants.

The law is designed to protect Canadian cattle from bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as mad cow disease, which scientists believe spreads through tainted feed.

Eating BSE-infected cattle can cause a similar neurological disease in humans, called new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

The maximum penalty for breaking the feed-ban law is a \$200,000 fine and two years in jail, said Sergio Tulusso, CFIA's food program co-ordinator.

As far as Tulusso knows, no charges have been laid since the law was enacted.

The B.C. quarantine shows that despite careful regulation of livestock feed production in Canada, there is still ample room for human error.

CFIA officials spent all week assuring the public the diseased cow did not enter the human food chain. It did, however, infiltrate the animal food chain.

The diseased cow was ill when it appeared for slaughter and inspectors deemed it unfit for human consumption and kept its head for testing.

However, the tests were backlogged by three months and the carcass was allowed to proceed to an Edmonton rendering plant.

There it was broken down to make a protein supplement used in chicken feed, Kiley said. Canada permits rendered cow remains to be fed to chicken and pigs, animals not susceptible to BSE.

The tainted protein supplement travelled from Edmonton to feed mills in B.C., where it was properly added to chicken feed, Kiley said.

Animal health regulations require that vendors record every sale, he said.

"Based on those records, we are able to contact all of the people who purchased this particular batch of poultry feed."

Labels warn individual farmers not to feed poultry food to cows, said Jake Davidson, feed department manager with Otter Co-op in Aldergrove.

"If everybody follows the rules, including the guy who buys the feed, the Canadian food chain is safe," he said.

To cut the risk of contamination, some feed-mill operators have stopped using ruminant-based protein supplements in feed altogether.

Jake Friesen, owner of Clearbrook Grain and Milling, took the step because as a smaller operator with only one plant, he found it difficult to completely separate cattle and chicken feed.

"Your bins are never totally cleaned out," he said.

Federal inspectors are diligent about testing, Friesen said, and will shut down a feed mill for the slightest trace of contamination.

Friesen said what most disturbs him about last week's crisis is the delay in diagnosing the sick cow in Alberta.

"It does not instill a whole lot of confidence," he said.

A British expert on mad cow disease says Canada should ban cattle remains from being processed into animal feed of any kind.

Malcolm Ferguson-Smith, a genetics professor from Cambridge University, also said all feed made from the carcass of the diseased Alberta animal should be immediately recalled.

"That was not done in the United Kingdom in the initial stage of the epidemic, and everybody regrets the fact that no attempt was made to call back the feeds that had already been sold to farmers that could have been contaminated," he said.

Meanwhile, investigators are still tracking the life cycle of the diseased cow and her offspring. The number of quarantined farms in Alberta and Saskatchewan yesterday had risen to 13.

Preliminary test results on the cow's herdmates, slaughtered earlier last week, may be released as early as today.