



MAD COW DISEASE

INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL HANSEN, CONSUMER POLICY INSTITUTE

SOURCE: CBC RADIO ONE
PROGRAM: AS IT HAPPENS
DATE: JANUARY 12, 2004
TIME: 18:31
LENGTH: 9 MINUTES

BARBARA BUDD (Announcer): Canadian beef is safe. That's what federal Agriculture Minister Bob Speller is telling trade partners in Asia this week and that's what Prime Minister Paul Martin will be telling American President George Bush when they meet tomorrow. But will the trade partners buy it? If not, Dr. Michael Hansen of the Consumer Policy Institute will not be surprised. For years he's been advocating tighter North American standards for BSE testing and cattle feed. Dr. Hansen is in New York.

MARY LOU FINLAY (Host): Dr. Hansen what do you think we need to do to ensure the safety of our beef supply?

DR. MICHAEL HANSEN (Consumer Policy Institute): Well I think Canada needs to do the same thing that we've recommended in the US, and that's, first, you need to test all animals going to slaughter with one of these rapid tests that tests them for the presence of BSE.

FINLAY: All animals?

HANSEN: All animals going to slaughter until such time is when you can accurately identify their age at slaughter, then you can go and just test them from 20 months and above. Because so far, the youngest animal that's been found with one of these tests is 20 months old. Now, in the feed area we're recommending that the US and Canada should do the same thing that they've done in Europe and Japan, and that is, ban the feeding of mammalian protein, with few exceptions, to all food animals.

FINLAY: Why do you think our authorities in Canada and the US are so loath to, to begin taking these measures?

HANSEN: I think they're loath to begin taking the measures because, number one, there'll be an economic impact. But number two, that's an admission that the disease is really here and we need to take it seriously. I think up until this time there's really been, it's almost like ostriches with their head in the sand, saying it can't happen here and therefore just taking these little small half-measures.

FINLAY: So of course that's probably partly what they're afraid of, is that if they do start testing every animal they will find more cases.

HANSEN: Absolutely. I think part of their problem is, at least, it's on an unconscious, if not a conscious level, the reason they don't want to do widespread testing is they're scared of what, what we'll find, that we might find not only more animals, but that they won't be in the single digits, that they could be in the hundreds or even thousands.

FINLAY: Does it do any good to increase just the percentage of animals tested, as Canada's agriculture minister, for example, announced last week?

HANSEN: If you're significantly increasing the percentages, yes. But with the kind of increases that we've seen in both, suggested in Canada and that have been suggested in the US, that's very insufficient. Look, compare that Japan tests 100 per cent of their cows going to slaughter. In Europe they test, functionally, one-out-of-four animals in their national herd. In the US and in Canada we're testing, of the animals that go to slaughter, one-in-a-couple of thousand or less.

FINLAY: So is it going to be even harder, well continue to be hard to persuade the Americans to do this since, at the moment, they can say we still don't have a problem. The problem is all in Canada.

HANSEN: Well, the problem with saying that is, I think at least from the viewpoint of our government, rather than play the finger-pointing blame game, they did the honourable thing. They did come up last week and when the animal was identified as coming from Canada, they didn't try to play the blame game. They had Canadians there and Dr. DeHaven got up and said, this is a North American problem. They're recognizing that the border vis-à-vis cattle is almost non-existent because many, many animals have gone, flown, over both sides of the border. The same is true with feed.

FINLAY: Well now they're talking about possibly labelling the point of origin of the cows though, which would allow them to say, this particular cow has never been north of the border. Feel free. Feel safe.

HANSEN: No, but that wouldn't, because look, since feed goes back and forth, there's some question as to whether the feed that these animals got, even if they were on Canadian farms, might have come from the US.

FINLAY: Right.

HANSEN: And if that's true, that the infected feed went to those animals, the infected feed would have gone to animals that were inside the US. And given the low level of testing, it's sort of surprising that they managed to find something.

FINLAY: Talk about, for a moment, about the feed problem. Because they're still hoping, they say, that both of the animals that have been discovered to have had mad cow were probably infected before the feed controls went in, in other words, the ban on feeding ruminants to ruminants went into effect.

HANSEN: Right. This whole notion of, that these animals, that this last animal was born after the feed ban came into effect seems to us just to be a desire to be able to show that the ban is supposedly working. From what I understand, this animal is somewhere between four to four-and-a-half, to six-and-a-half years old. They have not been able to produce concrete proof that it actually is six-and-a-half years old. Because they initially said that it was four to four-and-a-half.

FINLAY: Yes.

HANSEN: So, they then came out and said, well, we think it's six-and-a-half years and that it was conveniently born before the ban. But I've never seen any absolute proof as to the age of that animal.

FINLAY: They don't have the complete records on this animal now?

HANSEN: Well, from what I understand they're still saying that the animal was older than four years.

FINLAY: Yes.

HANSEN: That's what they said. They're not giving an exact age. So, there seems to be some question.

FINLAY: Is it possible though that these, the only animals that were born before the feed ban went into effect are ...

HANSEN: Well, that's, it's possible that this one might have been born before the feed ban. But, what we have to realize is that feed ban has got some gigantic loopholes in it that permit the feeding of material that we know can be infectious. We know that there is, there is at least three exemptions up in Canada that allow material that contain infectious material from cattle to be fed back to cattle.

FINLAY: How's that?

HANSEN: And those three loopholes are, number one, in Canada, as in the US, there's an exemption for blood and blood products. They're completely exempt from the rules. So that means you can take blood products from cattle and feed them back to cattle. And we know blood can be infectious.

FINLAY: We know that.

HANSEN: Yes we do. There was an experiment that was done in the United Kingdom, where they took BSE, they fed it to sheep. While the sheep were incubating the disease, before they exhibited any symptoms, you could then take blood from those sheep and transfuse them into other sheep and at least one, or actually two of those sheep that got the blood transfusion came down with that disease.

FINLAY: All right.

HANSEN: A second loophole is there's an exemption for what's called plate waste. That is when you go into a restaurant and you eat, say, a t-bone steak. Whatever you don't finish, rather than be thrown out, that can actually go into the animal food chain. The third avenue is in the US, and I believe in Canada as well, you can take animals that are sick, that is they can go into the animal feed chain. That can also go into pet food. So pet food was exempt from the labelling requirements. So pet food can contain products from cows and other ruminants and it doesn't have to be labelled, 'do not feed to cattle and other ruminants.' So that means you could render an animal. Theoretically, the animal that was sick, that was born in Alberta could have been legally rendered at a feed mill. That feed could have gone into pet food and then that pet food, since it's not labelled, you could take what's called distressed and salvaged pet food. It can't be sold into retail because of cancer, banged up or what's called salvaged and distressed. That material can actually go into cattle feed.

FINLAY: You said the reason for not doing more, the reasons were economic ones. How much would it cost to put all of these necessary tests and bans into effect.

HANSEN: Well that, I don't know what the total price would be. I do know that in terms of testing all the animals that go to slaughter, if you use these quick tests, the amount that they cost varies. We've seen, in the United States, that it costs about 50 dollars for the USDA to test a cow.

FINLAY: But what's it going to take to persuade the governments that this is what we have to do? A total import ban on the part of all the trade partners, or what?

HANSEN: Well I think it's the case that, for Japan at least, I don't see Japan opening and a probably South Korea, I don't seen either of those countries opening the market without either, without Canada and or the US testing all animals that go to slaughter. Or, the compromise might be all animals above a given age, such as 20 months.

FINLAY: Right. All right Dr. Hansen, thanks for talking to us.

HANSEN: Thank you.

FINLAY: Bye.

HANSEN: Bye, bye.

BUDD: Dr. Michael Hansen is a researcher with the Consumer Policy Institute in New York.