

We should test every cow

Instead of criticizing the Japanese for closing their door to our cattle, we should be learning from them, says Alberta political scientist WENRAN JIANG

Agriculture Minister Bob Speller has been touring East Asia and North America this month trying to persuade our trading partners to reopen their borders to Canadian cattle. He has assured them Canadian beef is safe, even though a ban was imposed last May after a case of mad-cow disease was found in Alberta, and then extended with the recent discovery of another case in the United States, that also was traced to Alberta.

While few expect Mr. Speller's trip to produce any tangible results, Canadians are led to believe that this is a fresh start in a good process headed by a new minister. But there are clear indications that Canada's effort to save our beef industry continues to move in the wrong direction, as it has done in the past eight months. The latest government policies for combatting bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) are no more than a set of less-than-half-measures guided by a shortsighted vision, if there is one at all.

To start with, Mr. Speller's team brought the wrong agenda to Asia. Trying to open the Japanese market for Canadian beef at this moment is neither realizable nor necessary. Tokyo is in no mood to relax its import standards at the height of another North American BSE panic, and Japan is insignificant to Canada's cattle exports: We only shipped 20,000 tonnes of beef to Japan in the year prior to our BSE outbreak.

The real significance of Japan is that it has one of the best BSE detection and testing systems on Earth, all being established after the first case of its own mad cow was found in 2001. The agenda the minister should have brought with him to Tokyo, was to learn valuable lessons from the Japanese experience. The Canadian delegation had an opportunity to observe how Japan handled the BSE crisis and to learn how Japan's current 100-per-cent testing procedure was put in place just six months after the disaster struck.

Yes, we no longer call the Japanese position on the BSE issue "ridiculous," "stupid" or "beyond science," and it's a positive sign that Canada is willing to study Japanese demands instead of dismissing them as we have in the past. But, unfortunately, Mr. Speller continues to insist that our science is up to international standards and that our BSE screening measures are adequate. In reality, Canada has one of the worst BSE monitoring and testing regimes among the world's major cattle-producers.

Facts speak for themselves: Japan is known to test every cow going into the food chain for BSE. Both Britain and Germany test all cattle at and over 24 months of age.

Other European countries screen all cows 30 months and older for BSE. France, having only a fraction of the U.S. cattle population, tests more cows for BSE in a single week than the United States has tested in the past 10 years combined. On average, Europe tests one in every four cows - a 25-per-cent minimum testing commitment. In contrast, Canada tested only one in every 600 cows last year, and only one in every 1,000 cows the year before (out of a total of 3.3 million cattle slaughtered each year). The United States tested even fewer: only one in every 1,700 cows (about 20,000 of the 35 million slaughtered cows last year).

With such poor testing records, one doesn't need to be a mathematician to conclude that the two cases of BSE in North America were found more by chance than by cautious design, and mad-cow contaminated beef must have ended up on our dinner table.

Yet the newly announced federal screening plan for BSE has committed only to testing as many as 30,000 cows (one in every 110) and only in five years time. Measured by Japanese or European standards, this is far short of being adequate or acceptable.

Ottawa must stop denying the presence of BSE in our food chain and must start to work with a real sense of crisis. Let's acknowledge that we have found very few cases of BSE precisely because we have not tested as vigorously as the Japanese and the Europeans have done. Let's also acknowledge that the science on mad cow' disease's potential risks for humans is still very fuzzy and use caution as the best approach.

Let's stop complaining about others blocking our beef and put our energy into enhancing Canada's surveillance system and increasing the amount of BSE testing -- at least reaching the European standards in the very near future, if not immediately. Let's ultimately aim for 100-per-cent testing.

Canada cannot achieve these goals without the co-operation of the United States. Thus, Ottawa must make sure that President George W. Bush's recent acknowledgment that North America is one integrated market does not get lost in the Congress and other branches of the U.S. government.

Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, who once called the Japanese practice on BSE testing "absolutely useless," is now contemplating doing in his province exactly what the Japanese do: testing every cow. He must be credited for overcoming his stubbornness with his practical attitude. If Mr. Klein is "willing to put in the highest of protocols relative to testing," why can't Ottawa do the same?

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