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Lagging on the health front

The latest mad cow discovery is treated not as a potential health threat but mainly as an economic threat to ranchers

BY THOMAS WALKOM

When Canada's first homegrown case of mad cow disease was discovered two years ago, we were told not to worry that it was just one cow.

When the second case was found later that year, this time in a Canadian-born U.S. cow, we were again advised not to fret. This one, we were told, counted on the U.S. side of the ledger.

Then, earlier this month, when a third Canadian cow was found stricken with mad cow disease (technically known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE) we were told that, really, there was still no problem.

This time we were told that in spite of its earlier just-one-cow assurances, the federal government had always expected more cases of BSE to crop up.

True, cattle raised on the same Alberta ranch as the latest diseased cow may well have been eaten by humans, an official with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency conceded to the Edmonton Journal.

Nonetheless, federal officials said, the chance of any human contracting variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), a fatal brain-wasting condition caused by eating mad-cow meat, remains remote.

"From a public health perspective, this finding does not threaten the safety of Canadian beef," insisted Federal Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell.

All of which is accurate in a statistical sort of way. Even Britain, perhaps the country most affected by mad cow disease, did not suffer a public health disaster. Only about 135 Britons have died so far from the variant of brain wasting disease linked to mad cow disease and that in a nation of 60 million.

So it's correct that eating beef is not as risky statistically as, say, smoking cigarettes. Still, the Canadian government's response to this whole thing seems somehow inadequate.

Ottawa insists on treating mad cow disease as a purely economic issue. Thus, the latest incident is treated not as a potential health threat to those who eat beef but as a potential economic threat to Canadian ranchers.

Curiously, much of the news media seem to be moving in lockstep with the government here. Most media stories focus exclusively on the trade impact of mad cow disease.

The theme of the coverage goes something like this: unscrupulous U.S. ranchers, anxious to protect their profits, will use the latest case as an excuse to pressure their government to keep the border closed to Canadian cattle thus hurting virtuous Canadian ranchers.

All of which has some truth. This is in part a trade story. But only in part.

It is also a public health story perhaps not as immediately dramatic as some (it can take years for vCJD to make itself evident in humans), but a public health story nonetheless.

Otherwise, why would anyone care at all?

Ottawa has moved swiftly to subsidize faltering ranchers hurt by the swift (and understandable) reluctance of consumers in nations such as Japan to eat beef that just might wither their brains.

But on the health front, the federal government has consistently lagged. Bowing to pressure from the ranching and meat-packing lobbies, Ottawa has been shockingly lackadaisical about ensuring the safety of the beef system.

Even after the first homegrown case of mad cow was found, the federal government moved with agonizing slowness. It has still not followed Britain's sensible lead and banned the practice of feeding dead cows to pigs and chickens (the problem here is that these animals may then be ground up in turn and fed back to cattle).

Canada did announce in July that it wouldn't let farmers feed so-called high-risk parts of dead cattle, such as spinal cords, to animals like pigs and chickens. But it took another six months to put these new regulations on paper. And even now, they are still not implemented. Rather they are being sent around for discussion.

The government has expanded its BSE inspection program. Yet it still remains woefully inadequate.

While the Japanese inspect every dead cow for BSE, Canada now looks at only about 20,000 a year out of a cattle population of 5 million.

Even here, the government relies on farmers to volunteer their cattle for testing, with a bounty program that pays \$225 a head.

That might catch ancient wheezers that are about to be destroyed anyway (that's apparently how this month's case was discovered). But it will not catch younger cows in which the disease is not yet evident.

Again the reason for Ottawa's reluctance to test has to do with money. Ranchers and meat packers worry that serious testing will raise their costs to levels that consumers are unwilling to pay. And perhaps they are right.

So we wait. Not for the next episode of mad cow disease that is already old news. We wait for the first homegrown case in which a Canadian's brain is wormholed by vCJD. Perhaps then the government will concede that this is a health problem, too.