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# Complacency is Real Killer in Mad Cow

## By Stuart Laidlaw

In a big country with too few people to fill it, we Canadians have long been a source of food to the world. First, to our colonial masters. Next, to our trading partners. It's been good business for us, and as a country capable of producing more food than we could ever eat, our responsibility.

It's never been an easy role to play. Abundance of production is no guarantee of customers or sales.

But agriculture hasn't been our second largest industry — after cars — just because we produce a lot of food. It has happened because our farmers have been able to compete with the best in the world.

It has also meant competing with the cheapest in the world — a world where the rules may not always be as stringent as ours, a world where other countries' farmers may not have as many regulators looking over their shoulders.

And that has meant compromises to keep our farmers competitive while ensuring the safety of the food supply, and food safety measures that in the end amounted to little more than public relations campaigns and fed a dangerous complacency about the safety of our food.

One such compromise was on whether to feed animals to animals. With the announcement of a case of mad cow disease in Alberta last week, that compromise needs rethinking. In Canada, like the United States, we do not allow feeding ground-up cows to other cows. We do, however, allow feeding ground-up cows to chickens and pigs, and feeding those chickens and pigs back to cows.

It's a reckless compromise. All it would take is for chickens or pigs to do what was once thought impossible — become the latest species to develop its own form of mad cow disease — and Canada could be thrown into a full-blown mad cow crisis. A study in the journal *Nature* in 1998 suggested that poultry and pigs could be carriers of mad cow disease, without developing the disease.

In Britain, the regulations are much more strict, banning the feeding of any animals to other animals.

This eliminates the risks Canada's feed ban allows, as well as the risk that feed meant for chickens or pigs might end up going to cows.

This is one possibility investigators are exploring over the weekend as they track the fallout from Canada's case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease.

Brian Evans, chief veterinarian for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), told reporters Friday that the extent of any country's feed ban is based on the level of risk perceived in that country. Britain knew it had a problem, so it put in a strict ban. We did not believe we had a problem, so we put in a less-strict feed ban. "We will re-examine the rules," he said.

It's about time. From the beginning, Canada's efforts to keep the country free of mad cow disease had a disconcerting hint of public relations about them, put in place to placate the public without putting too much of a strain on the industry.

Britain made the same mistake in the early days of its mad cow disease crisis.

Claude Lavigne, CFIA's man in charge of keeping mad cow out of Canada, has long defended Canada's more lax animal feed ban by saying that mad cow was a "European disease." In an interview three years ago, he said: "This has been found in Europe. It's a European disease, and that's about it ... We're free of this disease."

According to what has been discovered so far, Alberta's mad cow likely already had BSE by the time Lavigne was making reassuring comments about Canada being "free of this disease."

Such complacency is dangerous. It lowers our guard, allows mistakes to happen and problems to slip through the cracks.

It's what allows a cow literally falling down with mad cow disease to be presumed by slaughterhouse inspectors to have nothing worse than pneumonia, and for nearly four months to pass before the cow's head is tested for mad cow disease.

It is such complacency, as much as tainted feed and twisted proteins called prions (which scientists believe causes mad cow disease), that allows mad cow to spread and beef industries to be destroyed.

Mike McMorris of the Ontario Cattlemen's Association said the risk of mad cow had to be balanced against the economic cost of strict feed bans, and the potential for lost markets if costs became too high. "We need to be competitive in the world market," he said.

The thing is, we are no longer in the world market. Every day brings news of more farms under quarantine and countries refusing to buy our beef. Europe has been one of the holdouts in the banned-because-of-BSE group, but the Europeans have refused to buy our beef for years, anyway, because we inject our cattle with hormones.

Getting back into the world market after this outbreak could prove expensive.

Yesterday, Alberta Agriculture Minister Shirley McClellan told a news conference McMorris expects that we may have to adopt the strict feed ban in place in Britain if we hope to rebuild our credibility.

McMorris doesn't think tougher feed controls are needed from a scientific point of view, but may be needed as a public relations exercise. Lavigne, at a news conference Thursday, gave one more reason for toughening our feed ban. "The law says you shall not feed prohibited materials to a cow but mistakes can happen."

We'll also likely need to start putting more money back into inspectors and testing labs. In the U.S., North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan wants the border kept closed to Canadian beef until our inspection and testing systems are upgraded.

"Allowing the head of a diseased cow to sit on a shelf for four months because they are short-staffed is not an excuse our country should accept," he wrote in a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman.

While we're at it, we should consider dropping hormones, and eliminating bovine blood, gelatin, lard and tallow from the diet of our cattle. We'll need every customer we can get once this crisis is under control. There's no reason any longer to do anything that might keep us out of a market.

***Stuart Laidlaw is a member of the Star's editorial board and author of Secret Ingredients: the Brave New World of Industrial Farming.***