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Cattle feed violates ban: federal tests **Animal remnants found in 4 brands**

By April Lindgren, with files from Chad Skelton

Federal tests have discovered that four brands of Canadian cattle feed likely included cattle or other ruminant parts in violation of a ban on animal remains designed to protect against mad cow disease.

Sergio Toluoso of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency said the feed and feed ingredients were sold as being free of animal matter, but microscopic examinations detected animal material in 66 of 110 samples tested between January and March, 2004.

Subsequent inspections of feed mills led officials to conclude "there were some cases where it was more likely than others that it could be ruminant protein," said Mr. Toluoso, the agency's feed program co-ordinator.

"We are looking at four cases where we thought it [feed] could be material of ruminant origin."

Mr. Toluoso played down any risk the material could lead to the spread of mad-cow disease. About half of the 110 samples were taken from imported feed products, while the balance came from Canadian mills. CFIA officials would not release the names or locations of the four plants.

Feeding ruminants (cows, goats, sheep, deer and other animals that chew their cud) to other ruminants is a major risk factor in the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE.

Human consumption of BSE-infected beef has been linked to the development of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a condition that killed more than 100 people in Britain in the 1990s.

Experiments have shown an animal needs to consume as little as one milligram of BSE-infected material to develop the disease.

In a January, 2004, internal memo to CFIA president Dick Fadden, Mr. Toluoso wrote that "compliance with the existing ban [on feeding ruminants to ruminants] is a critical factor in preventing the disease from spreading to other animals.

"Major non-compliance with the feed ban cannot be tolerated, and measures to address the risks of domestic ruminants being exposed to prohibited animal proteins must be initiated promptly," said the memo, obtained by The Vancouver Sun.

Canada banned the use of ruminants in feed for cattle and other ruminants in 1997. But ruminant remains can still be fed to chickens and pigs, and chicken and pig remains can be fed to cattle.

Critics say the loophole allows for the cross-contamination of feed destined for Canadian beef, and the CFIA test results suggest this is exactly what is happening.

"Even after confirming cases of BSE, we're still not cleaning up the feed system," said Michael McBane of the Canadian Health Coalition, a health lobby group. "We're basically playing Russian roulette, and for what benefit? The [export] market has been closed and we're still being caught with contaminated feed."

The coalition wants Canada to follow the Europeans in adopting a complete ban on all animal protein in any feed for animals destined for human consumption.

"If you are feeding cows back to cows and then people are eating the cows ... you can be transmitting mad cow disease," Mr. McBane said, noting there are many opportunities for feed containing ruminant remains to be mixed inadvertently with other feeds at feed mills and on farms.

The United States recently decided to reopen its borders in March to Canadian beef products, except for cattle older than 30 months. The Americans stopped importing Canadian beef following the discovery of one BSE-infected cow on an Alberta farm in May, 2003.

The discovery of another infected animal in Alberta in recent weeks has not affected the U.S. decision to open the border.

Christine Aquino, spokeswoman for federal Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell, said regular inspections and audits of the country's 550 feed mills have shown "a very high compliance with the feed ban."

Mr. Tulusso insisted there was little risk that the ruminant remains in the four tainted feeds were infected with BSE, because the incidence of the disease in Canadian cattle is low.

Even if the feed did include BSE-infected material, he added, the cattle that might have eaten it "are not all 100% susceptible to disease for 100% of their lives.

"The chances of the disease being transmitted through the system with all these buffers in place are really small," he said.