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Secret tests reveal cattle feed contaminated by animal parts

Mad cow fears spark review of 'vegetable-only' livestock feeds

By Chad Skelton

A series of secret tests on cattle feed conducted by the federal government earlier this year found that more than half the feed tested contained animal parts not listed on the ingredients, according to internal documents obtained by The Vancouver Sun.

The test results raise troubling questions about whether rules banning the feeding of cattle remains to other cattle -- the primary way in which mad cow disease is spread -- are being routinely violated.

According to internal Canadian Food Inspection Agency documents -- obtained by The Sun through the Access to Information Act -- 70 feed samples labelled as vegetable-only were tested by the agency between January and March of this year. Of those, 41 (59 per cent) were found to contain "undeclared animal materials."

"The presence of animal protein materials [in vegetable feeds] may indicate ... deliberate or accidental inclusion of animal proteins in feeds where they are not supposed to be," said an internal memo to the president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency last April that described the test results as "worrisome."

The memo, from Sergio Toluoso, feed program coordinator for the CFIA, said the contamination could also have been caused inadvertently -- for example, through the transporting of different feeds in the same trucks.

Controlled experiments have shown an animal needs to consume as little as one milligram of infected material -- about the size of a grain of sand -- from an animal with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) to develop the brain-wasting disease.

Michael Hansen, an expert on mad cow disease with the U.S.-based Consumers Union, the independent research institute that publishes Consumer Reports, said the CFIA tests are troubling.

"The fact that stuff that is labelled as vegetable feed, that 59 per cent of it has animal material, that's incredibly high," said Hansen, who has a PhD in biology. "This should be a wake-up call to CFIA. It doesn't look good."

Michael McBane, national co-ordinator for the Canadian Health Coalition, a watchdog group, said the tests suggest the feed ban is not being adequately enforced.

"It demonstrates the fact that the [feed] ban is basically meaningless," McBane said. "It's pretty well recognized that we have mad cow disease in Canada because of contaminated feed. It's the frontlines in the battle to stop the spread."

Consumption of beef from cows infected with BSE has been linked to the development in humans of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), a deadly brain-wasting illness.

In the 1990s, the United Kingdom suffered an outbreak of BSE that was followed by more than 100 people dying of vCJD.

In 1997, as a precaution, Canada implemented a ban on feeding ruminants -- like sheep and cattle -- to other ruminants. However, ruminant remains can still be fed to chicken and pigs, and chicken and pig remains can be fed to cattle.

With the discovery of a lone Alberta cow with BSE in May 2003, the feed ban took on added importance.

"Compliance with the existing ban is a critical factor in preventing the disease from spreading to other animals," Tulusso wrote in January in an internal memo to CFIA president Dick Fadden. "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."

According to the documents, concerns about the integrity of Canada's feed were first raised in the summer of 2003, when U.S. authorities turned back seven separate shipments of vegetable feed from Canada because they were contaminated with animal parts.

"The animal proteins detected in these [shipments] were not supposed to be in the feeds," Tulusso explained to Fadden in an August 2003 memo. "While the results initially appear to be very worrying, it is difficult to interpret the real significance of these findings."

To determine if there was a wider problem with Canadian feed, the CFIA initiated a nationwide testing program of both domestic and imported feed in early 2004.

To make the job easier for its scientists, the agency collected only samples that were labelled as vegetable-only, such as soy meal or grain -- feed that shouldn't have any animal parts in it at all.

The samples were tested by CFIA scientists in Ottawa, who looked at a few grams of each sample under a microscope.

The first batch of 70 samples found that a majority contained animal protein.

And the worst results were for feed manufactured in Canada.

Of the 28 domestic feed samples tested by the agency, 20 had undeclared animal protein in them -- 71 per cent of all the samples.

In comparison, just under half of the imported samples -- 19 of 39 -- contained animal parts.

(Three of the 70 samples were of undetermined origin.)

In an interview with The Sun, Tulusso said he couldn't say how many of the contaminated feed samples contained cattle remains.

"In the absence of real identifiable material like feathers and hairs, [scientists are] left looking at bone fragments and pieces of muscle tissue, and those are virtually impossible to determine what species they might come from," Tulusso said.

As a result, he said, the agency doesn't have a clear idea of how much cattle remains have been fed to other cattle.

"We knew entering this testing survey that there was a possibility we could generate more questions for ourselves than we could answer," he said. "We hadn't done this before and to some extent we weren't sure what we were going to find. And it does make it worse that you can't explain what they actually are."

In addition to concerns over testing, the CFIA documents obtained by The Sun also reveal problems with the feed mills that produce animal feed.

There are about 550 commercial feed mills in Canada.

According to a memo to Fadden last March, an initial inspection last year of several hundred of those mills found that 21 per cent were not complying with federal regulations.

Most of those violations were minor and quickly corrected.

However, the report notes that seven mills had "major non-compliance issues" involving things like proper labelling and record-keeping.

And three mills were failing "to prevent the contamination of ruminant feeds with non-ruminant feeds containing ruminant meat and bone meal" -- the exact type of contamination that can spread BSE.

Two of those three mills successfully recalled their contaminated product, but the report notes that in one case, some of the feed was sent out and consumed by cattle.

Tolusso said the CFIA's feed tests led to some follow-up inspections in feed mills, but no further recalls of feed.

Earlier this month, the CFIA announced it would ban the parts of cattle most susceptible to BSE infection -- such as the spine and brains -- from all feed, including that destined for pigs and chickens.

Such animal parts are known as specified risk materials (SRMs).

Tolusso acknowledged the agency's tests were one reason for the stricter regulations.

"If we recognize there are lots of opportunities for the wrong kind of protein to get in the wrong kind of feed ... then perhaps the more prudent thing to do is to remove some of these higher-risk tissues altogether," he said.

Some experts have argued that Canada should go even further and keep cattle remains out of feed altogether, as is done in Europe.

"What they need to do is cut out the loopholes [and] stop feeding mammalian protein to food animals," Hansen said.

McBane agreed.

"At the end of the day, the only way to stop the transmission of BSE is a complete stop on recycling animal protein," he said.

Tolusso said the CFIA believes a ban on just the riskiest materials -- like cow brains -- will eliminate most of the risk of BSE spreading in Canada.

But he said the agency hasn't ruled out a total ban on cattle remains in feed.

"At this point, we've put our best guess forward [on] the most appropriate approach," he said. "But that doesn't preclude that ... we might have to go to a more strict ban."