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Agency opted not to use DNA test on feed

Test would have detected contamination of feed by banned animal material, expert says

By Chad Skelton

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency decided against using a DNA test on contaminated cattle feed that one expert says would have allowed it to determine if the feed contained banned cattle parts, The Vancouver Sun has learned.

On Thursday, The Sun reported that a series of secret CFIA tests on vegetable-based cattle feed and feed ingredients found that 41 of the 70 samples (59 per cent) contained "undeclared animal materials."

The CFIA has stressed that those tests -- conducted by looking at feed samples under a microscope -- do not allow it to determine whether cattle remains were fed to other cattle, the primary method in which mad-cow disease is spread.

"In the absence of real identifiable materials 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," Sergio Tulusso, the CFIA's feed program coordinator, told The Sun in an interview earlier this week.

However, Michael Hansen, an expert on mad-cow disease with the U.S.-based Consumers Union, the independent research institute that publishes Consumer Reports, said Thursday that there are DNA tests available that can determine what type of animal a piece of tissue comes from.

In an interview Thursday, Tulusso said the CFIA was aware of the DNA tests, but decided not to use them.

"We knew that these tests were out there and we also knew that they, too, had their limitations," said Tulusso.

One of those limitations, said Tulusso, is that certain types of cattle protein are permitted in cattle feed -- such as blood and milk.

As a result, said Tulusso, determining that cattle DNA was in feed would not have proven the ban had been violated.

However, Hansen said the tissue and bone fragments the CFIA's scientists found under the microscope were clearly not blood or milk -- and would have been large enough to submit to DNA testing.

"They've said they could physically see things [under the microscope]," said Hansen. "So you could . . . pull those out and test them. You only need a tiny amount."

Hansen said the agency's failure to use DNA testing raises questions about whether it was really interested in knowing what the animal parts were.

"Why wouldn't you do the tests?" said Hansen. "It makes me wonder: Did they not particularly want to find the answer? Because if they tested it and found virtually all of it was prohibited [cattle remains], I guess they would have to admit there are serious problems with the feed rules."

Tolusso said such concerns played no role in the decision not to use the DNA tests.

"It would be in our best interests if we had a dependable test that we could use to test feed and ensure if it's in compliance [with the feed ban] or not," he said.

He said there are no additional feed tests currently underway.

Conservative agriculture critic Diane Finley said Thursday she doesn't think the CFIA is doing enough to prevent the spread of BSE.

"I have to wonder why the CFIA hasn't been moving a little faster on this," she said.

The CFIA feed tests were conducted earlier this year after U.S. authorities sent seven shipments of Canadian feed back in the summer of 2003 because they were contaminated with animal parts.

Finley said she thinks the CFIA should have started testing feed shortly after the country's feed ban was implemented in 1997.

"I would have expected it to have been done earlier, because we knew -- and they knew -- that this was how the disease can be spread," she said. "It just shows the slow reaction of the government and the CFIA. The minister has been claiming that they've been doing everything they possibly could to control it. And it's obvious they haven't been."

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 BSE to develop the brain-wasting disease.

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

Earlier this month, the CFIA proposed new regulations that 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.

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

However, on Thursday, Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister Andy Mitchell said the new regulations should be sufficient to prevent the spread of BSE in Canada.

"The reason why we are putting forward these additional regulations is to deal with those instances where there is the possibility of cross-contamination," said Mitchell. "We want to move forward on this and ensure our feed is safe. Cross-contamination is a possibility but that's why [we] are putting in these new regulations."

Kathleen Sullivan, general manager of the Animal Nutrition Association of Canada -- which represents feed producers -- said it has scheduled a meeting with the CFIA to discuss the results of its tests.

"This is the kind of thing any industry would be concerned about, provoked by, and want to explore," she said.

She said the association is also troubled by the fact that some of the internal memos obtained by The Sun -- which described the test results as "worrisome" -- conflict with assurances it has received from the CFIA.

"I have concerns about the internal memos that suggest some rather profound problems in the industry when the information was portrayed to us in a very different light," Sullivan said. "We're getting inconsistent information from CFIA on how they interpret the information."

Cindy McCreath, spokeswoman for the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, said the public shouldn't be concerned about the CFIA's tests because the animal material could be anything.

"Undeclared animal materials can mean many things -- rodent contamination, birds," she said. "It's highly unlikely that someone was dropping a cow's brain into a load of canola."

And McCreath stressed that many cattle in Canada don't even eat that much packaged feed -- because there is plenty of hay and silage grown on farms.