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Using blood in feed 'raises mad cow risk'

Livestock loophole in Canada's regulations should be closed, U.S. expert urges

By Chad Skelton

A U.S. expert on mad cow disease says an exemption to Canada's feed ban that allows cattle to be fed the blood of other cows is a regulatory loophole that increases the risk of the disease spreading farther in this country.

Michael Hansen, a research associate with the Consumers Union, the independent research institute that publishes Consumer Reports, said there is growing evidence that the infectious agents -- known as prions -- that cause bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) can be spread through blood.

"It's one of the loopholes that needs to be closed," said Hansen, who has a PhD in biology. In 2002, researchers at Britain's Institute for Animal Health reported the results of a study in which they transfused the blood of sheep infected with BSE and a similar prion disease into healthy sheep.

Of 24 sheep that received the blood, two became infected.

And over the past year, the British government has reported two cases of people in that country who have died of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) -- the human form of BSE -- after receiving blood transfusions from other vCJD sufferers.

Concerns that vCJD could be spread through blood products led Canadian Blood Services to announce in 1999 that it would not accept blood donations from anyone who has spent a total of more than three months in Britain or France since 1980.

"Over the past year or so, scientific evidence has suggested it's a very strong possibility that vCJD can be transmitted via transfusion," Derek Mellon, a spokesman with the blood agency, said Friday.

Sergio Tulusso, feed program coordinator for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, said there is no evidence that cattle can contract BSE from consuming the blood of other cows.

"If you're a science-based organization, there's no sense in banning things that are of no risk," Tulusso said.

But Hansen said the fact blood has been shown to be infectious when transfused should be enough for Canada to ban it from feed as well -- as Europe has done.

"Allowing blood and blood products in animal feed makes no sense," said Hansen. "We know blood can be infectious."

The U.S. also allows cattle to be fed the blood of other cows.

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.

Michael McBane, national coordinator with the Canadian Health Coalition, a watchdog group affiliated with labour unions and community groups, agreed that blood should be banned from cattle feed.

"If they make an exception for blood, they've basically made the feed ban meaningless," said McBane. "It's bad science if they think that blood is not a risk material for the transmission of BSE."

Hansen said blood products are used as a cheap protein source for cattle, especially calves, in part because milk is relatively expensive.

"Milk is more valuable sold to humans than [given] to cattle," said Hansen.

Canada has had a ban on feeding cattle remains to other cattle since 1997.

However, cattle remains may be fed to poultry and pigs and poultry and pig remains may be fed to cattle.

A lone case of BSE was discovered in a cow in Alberta in May 2003.

Another BSE-infected cow discovered in Washington State in December 2003 was later found to have been born in Alberta.