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Our Beef is with Bureaucrats

For years, our food industry regulators relaxed amid lax monitoring and the mantra that mad-cow couldn't happen here, says author ANDREW NIKIFORUK

Alberta's mad-cow story is one infuriating tale. But most of the madness can be found in lax regulations and an industrial system of food production that is rapidly taking the culture out of agriculture.

Although a long parade of federal and provincial agriculture types have tried to reassure consumers and beef farmers that "the system is working," and "it is only one cow," don't believe a word of it. They are merely taking a page out of Goebbels's old script: The best lies are those repeated over and over again.

The truth, however, is deeply disturbing. From the beginning, the Canadian government hasn't taken bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or related brain-wasting agents seriously. Even though this "curious toxicity" rewrote the United Kingdom's rural economy, ate the brains of more than 100 Britons and resulted in the killing of 4.5 million cattle, the Canadian response has consistently been that of an arrogant Johnny-come-lately.

Canada, for example, didn't start a surveillance program for BSE until 1992: that is, two years after the United States did. Although this nation slaughters 3.6 million cattle every year, the feds only check about 3,000 animals for disease every year. Canadian professional inspectors argue that they are on guard for drooling and staggering cows, but the scientists have repeatedly warned that infected animals won't all look mad, but may simply fall over -- as Alberta's mad cow did. Consequently, Canada's feeble .03-per-cent surveillance rate is not only inadequate, but too small to detect a growing problem. The French, who raise only a quarter of the cattle we do, test 20,000 animals a week.

And consider this cow-kicker: Every country that has pretended to not have a BSE problem (which is like pretending you're not part of the global disease exchange), quickly found it had one when it beefed up its testing.

Canada was also tardy in banning the feeding of cattle bits (meat and bone meal) to cattle. Very early in the course of the U.K.'s BSE outbreak, scientists identified "hi-tech cannibalism" as the central culprit. The industrial practice of feeding cattle bits to dairy cattle not only produced more milk, but also put big holes in their brains. Nevertheless, Canada didn't ban animal feed made from sick cattle until 1997, or one year after the United States did. (At the time, the United States fed 13 per cent of its rendered cattle parts to cattle, according to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes, in *Deadly Feasts*.)

Our ban, like the U.S. ban, is still full of mad loopholes. Feed made from rendered pigs and chickens in BSE countries can be sold and fed to Canadian livestock. And sick domestic cows can be fed to pigs and chickens, whose rendered bits can, in turn, be fed back to cattle. As many scientists have noted, "cannibalistic feeding pathways" are still as wide open as a feedlot.

The people now investigating Canada's single case of mad-cow are the same folks who adamantly insisted that it couldn't happen here. Despite our strong trade links to the U.K., and the documented importation of feed in the 1990s, officials with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have ridiculed reporters worried about mad cows. "It's a European disease and that's about it," said Claude Lavigne, the agency's associate executive director of animal products, and the guy in charge of protecting consumers from BSE.

Didn't our professionals read a 2001 Health Canada study that concluded that BSE was alive and well in Canadian cattle in small numbers? Given the murky global trade in livestock products and BSE's eight-year incubation period, the report concluded that "animals could be harbouring the infective agent without reaching the stage of disease at which clinical signs or infectivity in brain tissues could have developed."

Nor have CFIA officials ever acknowledged the brilliant work of a Wisconsin BSE expert, Richard Marsh. He directly traced back several epidemics of transmissible mink encephalopathy or "mad-mink disease" in Ontario and Wisconsin to feed made from sick dairy cattle. Several strains of BSE, in other words, have probably been in North America for decades.

Another case of madness has been the government's promotion of game ranching -- a development that spread chronic wasting disease (CWD), another brain-eater. Nearly a decade ago, the governments of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ottawa endorsed the penning of wild elk and deer as a grand diversification scheme to revive rural economies already battered by Canada's careless industrial food policies. Scientists warned that putting wild game in feedlots could serve as a disease bridge to wildlife and Canada's \$30-billion cattle industry (possibly spread via urine). The scientists also warned that current disease tests for CWD and tuberculosis were unreliable.

Ralph Klein and his game-ranching buddies ignored this data and embraced the elk-and-deer trade. So did Saskatchewan. With this new trade came a \$30-million TB epidemic that affected cattle, wildlife and people -- and now a \$30-million CWD epidemic.

Despite the slaughter of thousands of elk and deer, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency remains a cheerful promoter of this fraudulent enterprise. It has even allowed the Canadian Cervid Council, an industry promoter, to triumphantly announce more cases of CWD with the familiar refrain "the system is working." (It is noteworthy that the mad cow found in Alberta may have been born in a region of Saskatchewan "hot" with CWD.)

Beef-eaters and farmers alike should now be asking how much more government-sponsored madness Canadians can afford -- and just how much more vulnerability Canadians want built into their food economy by the professionals.

Andrew Nikiforuk, a Calgary journalist, eats grass-fed beef and is the author of *The Fourth Horseman: A Short History of Plagues, Scourges and Emerging Viruses.*