

New York Times
January 19, 2005

Mad Cow across the border

EDITORIAL

The recent discovery of another case of mad cow disease in Canada, this time in a purebred Charolais from central Alberta, comes as no surprise. This is the second case discovered this year - the third since May 2003 - and it's a reminder that the single case found in the United States so far, a Holstein in Washington State, was traced to a Canadian herd. What makes this new discovery important is that this cow was born after restrictions banning the feeding of animal proteins to cattle were set up to prevent the spread of the disease. This new case is also another serious impediment to the United States Department of Agriculture's plans to resume cattle imports from Canada on March 7.

The critical question now is not simply how to keep American cattle herds from being infected by mad cow disease if imports resume. The question is how to get the U.S.D.A. to realize that the best protection it can offer ranchers and consumers is a large-scale, intensive testing program. Both Canada and the United States are relying on a feed ban to stop mad cow disease, but the effectiveness of the ban can be gauged only if there is widespread, comprehensive testing of cattle. No one knows yet how this young cow was infected or whether the ban was violated somehow. But there is no safety in making assumptions about the absence, or the presence, of mad cow disease.

What makes this all the more difficult is the enormous economic pressure being brought to bear. The cattle trade with Canada has been halted since the middle of 2003, and it has been enormously costly to Canadian ranchers and farmers. It has also been very profitable to American cattlemen. Now a group of ranchers has sued the U.S.D.A. to block the reopening of the cattle trade with Canada, arguing that importing Canadian livestock would threaten humans and cows in this country.

It will almost certainly be necessary to postpone the reopening of the border until, at the very least, the food that infected the cow in this new case has been traced. But the safest way to begin to reopen the border is to make sure that Canadian and American cattle are all tested rigorously for the presence of mad cow disease. The problem can't be solved until we know its real extent.