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ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald / Cattle roam apasture near High River on Friday, oblivious to the mad cow crisis raging around them. Farms have now been quarantined in three provinces.

NOTE: This story features a factbox "Mad Cow Disease in Alberta".Seven pages of coverage: On the mad cow trail A4; Was industry strict enough? A5; Layoffs, shutdowns loom A6; Charles Frank: Did Iraq snub play a part in border closure? Business, D1

Quarantines spread across 3 provinces: Safeguards on feed open to misuse

Fears of mad cow disease and questions about the safety of Canada's cattle feed grew Friday as federal officials tracking Alberta's lone case added three British Columbia farms to the quarantine list.

The B.C. farms -- one near the northern city of Prince George and two others near Langley -- were sealed after inspectors traced a shipment of chicken feed, made from the infected Alberta cow. Inspectors are trying to determine if any of the feed was used for cattle.

Safeguards to prevent cattle protein from being used in the beef industry -- banned in Europe after the mad cow outbreak in the late 1990s -- are now under scrutiny.

Canada's top veterinarian, Dr. Brian Evans, acknowledged Canada's system could be ripe for misuse because feed that is banned for cows is legal for pigs and poultry, which are not susceptible to bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE.

Alberta Agriculture Minister Shirley McClellan fears some provincial producers are giving illegal cattle feed to their stock.

"In the end, we depend on the integrity of producers to comply with the feed ban," she said. "It is illegal to feed cattle ruminant feed, and that is the issue."

Canada outlawed the practice of feeding cattle protein to other cattle, believed to be a source of transmission of the brain-wasting disease.

BSE attacks brain tissue, leaving it spongy and full of holes. Sufferers become increasingly disoriented and have difficulty standing.

In humans, the devastating disease is known as Creutzfeldt-Jacob. More than 100 deaths in Europe, mostly in Britain, have been linked to eating tainted beef.

The other farms now in quarantine -- eight in Alberta and two in Saskatchewan -- have also been linked to the infected cow, either as a ranch where it once resided or with herds including animals once part of her last herd.

A U.S. team of inspectors has arrived in Canada to assist with the investigation, now entering its second week and encompassing three provinces.

"The increasing number of herds under quarantine is a normal occurrence in an investigation of this type and does not indicate the situation is getting worse," said Evans.

Investigators are now waiting for test results from brain tissue obtained from herdsmates of the infected cow, which were slaughtered on Thursday. The findings are due early next week. Industry officials hope the testing will confirm the case is isolated and help open international markets.

"It's just a start," said Ron Glaser, a spokesman with Alberta Beef Producers. "Positive news with these next set of tests won't necessarily mean the border will open up right away."

On Friday, Barbados joined the list of countries -- led the United States, Canada's largest beef export market -- that are banning Canadian beef after the case was confirmed Tuesday in a black Angus breeder cow in the Peace River District.

Officials have estimated the country's export-dependent beef sector is losing as much as \$11 million a day, backing up production in Canada and threatening layoffs. Cargill Inc., which operates a meat-packing plant south of Calgary, laid off about 65 employees Friday after slowing production earlier this week.

XL Meats also shut down its plant in Moose Jaw, Sask. and sent employees for an early summer vacation. The company's operations in Calgary continue to operate at reduced production, but layoffs will likely follow if the U.S. ban lasts longer than a few weeks, owner Lee Nilsson said Friday.

In Washington, a North Dakota senator also raised concerns over the delay in testing and suggested tough new rules before the U.S. lifts its ban.

"Allowing the head of a diseased cow to sit on a shelf for four months because 'they are short-staffed' is not an excuse our country should accept," Byron Dorgan wrote in a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman.

Officials also attempted to counter more criticism over why provincial inspectors did not immediately test the animal for BSE, despite signs the animal could not stand when it was sent to be slaughtered in January.

Officials have maintained the animal was not showing any visible signs of the disease. "The normal clinical signs of BSE would not result in an animal immediately becoming what's referred to as a moribund or downer animal," Evans said. "There would have been other neurological signs noticed by an owner of such an animal well in advance of it moving to that stage."

The province's chief veterinarian defended the

inspection process, saying the test sample would have received higher priority had the carcass been destined for the dinner plate. This animal had already been determined unfit for human consumption, he said.

"A downer animal, yes, could be construed as an animal showing signs of BSE, but that's not what you usually see," said Gerald Ollis. "You usually see some sort of aggression, unco-ordination. The animal is trying to get up, spinning out, that sort of thing."

Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister Clay Serby suggested a widespread slaughter of all quarantined cattle may be needed to restore public confidence in Canadian beef. "It's my view that we might want to do that," Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister Clay Serby said. "That's about erring on the side of safety."