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## Prepare public for more mad cow, report says To prevent problems, staff should raise possibility of widespread BSE: document

By Chad Skelton

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency began making plans in October to prepare the public for the possibility that another case of mad cow disease would be found in Canada, according to internal documents obtained by The Vancouver Sun.

The agency's communications strategy -- marked "secret" -- was obtained by The Sun under the Access to Information Act. It outlined how a planned increase in the number of cows being tested for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) could turn up additional cases of the disease.

The strategy, dated Oct. 2, 2003, was produced after the discovery of an infected Alberta cow last May, but predates the discovery of an an Alberta-born cow with BSE in Washington State in December.

The strategy said "BSE is no longer a top-of-mind issue for the majority of Canadians." But it warned this was due in part to the perception that the infected Alberta cow was unique.

"The terms single, lone and isolated have been used extensively by the media and various spokespersons, including the Minister, to describe Canada's case of BSE," the strategy stated. "The notion that a low level of BSE may exist in Canada has not received high profile or sustained coverage, although statements and documents from CFIA officials have presented this possibility."

The document noted that the discovery of a second case of BSE could cause further harm to the country's cattle industry, which had already been the victim of import bans imposed by several countries.

"Industry has repeatedly noted that the detection of a single BSE-infected animal makes Canada's situation unique from those of other countries that have detected BSE," it stated.

"As the Canadian cattle industry struggles with financial losses due to closed borders, representatives have stated that part of the solution to re-establishing trade . . . rests in proving to the world that this was an isolated case."

A second case of BSE, the strategy warned, could make it more difficult to convince the public, and trade partners, that mad cow isn't widespread in Canada.

"The detection of an additional case may heighten perceived risk and lead to notions of outbreak and epidemic," it stated.

"Public health and vCJD [variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human brain disease linked to BSE] could emerge as primary issues as consumers question the safety of Canadian beef."

The strategy argued that, to prevent such problems, CFIA communications staff should begin immediately raising the possibility that BSE might be more widespread in Canada than originally thought.

The report said communications staff should "shift [their] communications approach to sensitize public and industry to the possibility, no matter how remote, of an additional case of BSE."