

Shoot, Shovel, and Shut-up

Ralph Klein suggests Alberta farmer should have covered up mad cow case

BY TIM COOK

(CP) - Alberta Premier Ralph Klein has taken aim at the owner of the province's infamous mad cow, saying a "self-respecting" rancher would not have taken the animal to slaughter but would instead have simply "shot, shovelled and shut up."

Klein's remarks were made at a weekend meeting of U.S. governors and western Canadian premiers. The remarks surfaced Tuesday. Klein was in Calgary but could not be reached for comment. His spokesman, Gordon Turtle, said Klein was being sarcastic and would never counsel anyone to break the law or not follow international protocols.

"The premier meant that in an ironic or almost a sarcastic way," said Turtle.

"He was reflecting on the irony of the fact that one isolated case of BSE can have this kind of impact on the economy, which it has in the last four months or so."

Klein made the remarks Sunday at the Western Governors' Association annual meeting in Big Sky, Mont.

Flanked by premiers from Canada's three other western provinces, Klein expressed his frustration with the way Canada has been treated by the international community after a single case of mad cow disease was discovered in a northern Alberta cow almost four months ago.

More than 30 countries closed their borders to Canadian beef. Only now are they slowly reopening.

"This all came about through the discovery of a single, isolated case of mad cow disease in one Alberta cow on May 20th," Klein told the assembly.

"The farmer - I think he was a Louisiana fish farmer who knew nothing about cattle ranching. I guess any self-respecting rancher would have shot, shovelled and shut up, but he didn't do that.

"Instead he took it to an abattoir and it was discovered after testing in both Winnipeg and the U.K. that this older cow had mad cow disease."

The farmer, Marwyn Peaster, could not be reached for comment.

In Saskatchewan, Canada's second-largest beef producing province, Agriculture Minister Clay Serby called Klein's remarks "unfortunate," but said he does not think the premier was advocating that ranchers break the law.

"I think Ralph, from time to time, tries to be humorous as well as serious," Serby said. "If, in fact, western governors are going away from there with the view that this is a practice that Canadians may be looking at adopting, this is a most untimely opportunity for a comment like that to be made.

"But I would not for a minute suggest or expect that Premier Klein was doing it in any kind of a serious manner."

All of Canada's major importers, including the United States, shut their borders after Peaster's cow was diagnosed with bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE. The common term is mad cow disease. The U.S. recently began accepting select cuts of Canadian beef but the vital live-cattle import market remains closed.

The crisis has cost the Canadian cattle industry well over a billion dollars, not including the steep drop in price for cattle on the domestic auction block.

Alberta Opposition Liberal Leader Ken Nicol lambasted Klein over the comments.

"I was absolutely shocked that (Klein) would say something like that in a public forum when we are trying to work with the U.S. to get them to open their borders to our beef," Nicol said.

"A person in his position should have known better because it reflects badly on the industry and food safety. The premier owes a big apology to every cattleman in Canada."

However, Ben Thorlakson of the Canadian Beef Export Federation said he sympathizes with Klein.

"I think what Mr. Klein is expressing is frustration over the response by the international community to our single case of BSE," said Thorlakson.

"It's important throughout the world to have speedy disclosure and it's also important throughout to have a responsible approach to BSE."

Neil Jahnke, president of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, said if better processes are not worked out to restore trade following isolated mad cow cases, then coverups could occur.

"It's something that we don't want to see happen and it is something that I am sure Mr. Klein does not want to see happen either," Jahnke said.

Klein and other politicians have been frustrated in the past with the border shutdown.

Ralph Goodale, Saskatchewan's lone federal cabinet minister, made headlines in July with an open letter saying the ban has more to do with trade than health and sends a message to "shoot, shovel and shut up" instead of reporting future BSE cases.

Klein has made headlines of his own. In July, he offered to pay \$10 billion to any Japanese citizen who comes to Canada and gets ill due to beef traced back to mad cow. Japan has been a key stumbling block to getting the U.S. border reopened because it has made clear it may rethink taking U.S. beef if it has Canadian beef mixed in with it.