

"This could be the tip of the iceberg" **Extent of problem won't be known until all cattle are tested: Expert**

By Jason Markusoff

EDMONTON - Experts say it doesn't matter whether there was one cow or two cows with mad cow disease, Canada has a problem and must do more to address it.

DNA confirmation Tuesday that the first U.S. case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy was found in a Holstein born in Alberta doesn't necessarily mean Canadian beef is more dangerous than American beef, said Giuseppe Legname, a neurologist at the University of California at San Francisco.

But it does raise the question of how many more diseased cows exist.

"This actually confirms our fears that there are many more cases out there than we know" on both sides of the border, Legname said. "A lot might just be undetected through the process and eventually be in the food supply." The fact that the two most recent North American cases of BSE came from animals born in Canada does not raise the risk, he said.

The first case was found in 1993 at a farm near Red Deer in a cow born in Britain, which has had more than 175,000 cases.

Legname and his research partner, Nobel-prize-winning scientist Stanley Prusiner, have long urged governments to be more vigilant in protecting citizens from BSE and its human counterpart, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, which comes from eating the nervous tissues of infected cattle.

Full-scale testing for BSE is crucial to determine how many other cattle have the disease, Legname said. "This could be the tip of the iceberg or this can be just an isolated number of cases. But we will not know that until we have a larger number of cattle screened."

Nobody has ever been diagnosed with variant CJD from Canadian or U.S. beef.

The brain-ravaging disease killed a Saskatchewan man in 2002, but investigators determined he'd eaten beef in Britain.

Worldwide, about 150 people have died of the incurable disease.

The Canadian government is downplaying health risks in favour of rallying behind the cattle industry, said Bradford Duplisea of the Canadian Health Coalition.

Federal Agriculture Minister Bob Speller's pronouncement that Canadian beef is safe reflects Ottawa's industry-booster mentality, Duplisea said.

"Where's the health minister? Where's the minister with the statutory responsibility to protect public health?" he asked.

The health-advocacy group has demanded that Canada screen all slaughtered cattle for BSE. Japan began that practice in reaction to its first mad cow case in 2001. Eight additional cases have been found.

Such testing would cost only a few extra pennies per pound of beef, Duplisea said. The Canadian government has said such surveillance levels are excessive and unnecessary.

Legname predicted that once Canada or the U.S. increases testing, they'll find a few more cases. Testing will then increase even more, possibly to the level of Japan or Europe, which tests about 25 per cent of its cattle.

Most of the North American public have remained confident in the safety of beef, but one Washington state school district has banned beef from its cafeteria, Reuters news agency reported Tuesday.