Toronto Star
August 7, 2003

BSE requires stricter feed ban

Mad Cow Disease was finally beat in the U.K. by a Complete Ban on the use of Cattle Parts in Feed

By DR. MANFRED WEISSENBACHER

Canada officially lost its status as a BSE-free country on May 20, the day a cow was confirmed with mad cow disease in Alberta. It can now be firmly predicted that there are more Canadian BSE cases to come.

This is mainly due to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's failure to introduce adequate measures to prevent BSE, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, from spreading within the Canadian cattle herd.

Mad cow disease is transmitted from one cow to another when cattle are fed protein meal made from cattle meat in order to accelerate growth and to increase milk productivity. This sort of "cattle cannibalism" was prohibited in the United Kingdom from July, 1988, when a ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban was introduced.

Later, it turned out that this feed ban was insufficient in stopping BSE from spreading further into the British cattle population. The United Kingdom experienced a total of more than 180,000 official BSE cases, but of these cattle more than 44,000 were born after July, 1988.

The spread of BSE in the United Kingdom was only contained after yet another, stricter feed ban was introduced in August, 1996. This feed ban entirely prohibited cattle parts being rendered into feed, including feed for chicken and pigs.

Such a measure was necessary because cattle protein, even if it may legally be used in chicken and pig feed, inevitably ends up being fed to cattle as well. First, there are cross-contaminations in feed factories that produce both cattle and pig/chicken feed, and second, farmers frequently do not differentiate between cattle, pig and chicken feed. Deliberately or erroneously, they feed their cattle with fodder intended for pigs and chickens. Hence, a simple ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban is inefficient and virtually impossible to police.

This experience has been noted in many countries. Denmark, for instance, prohibited cattle cannibalism in 1990, but several BSE cows were born between 1990 and 1996. In January, 1997, a law came into effect that prohibited producing cattle feed in the same factories as chicken and pig feed. However, a BSE cow born in 1998 indicated that cattle cannibalism still had not stopped. Finally, in January, 2001, European Union legislation forced Denmark to take all cattle protein, as well as chicken and pig protein, off the feed market. Since then, cows have regained their original plant eater status in the EU, while pigs and chickens are still fed with fish meal.

BSE reached Canada already in the late 1980s. In 1987, a bull was imported from Britain that came down with clinical BSE symptoms in 1993.

Very likely, more such animals entered Canada, but remained undetected and were rendered into the Canadian feed supply.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) waited until 1997 to introduce a ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban. By this stage the CFIA officials (and their FDA counterparts in the United States) could already draw upon the European Union experience.

They knew very well, or at least should have known, that a ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban is an inadequate measure to prevent BSE from spreading. Yet worse, they failed to step up the feed ban during the past six years, even though the inadequacy of such a ban was confirmed over and over again.

Apparently, the CFIA did not even try to police the inadequate feed ban. The investigation of the Alberta BSE cow, of which only the head was kept, promptly showed that the cow was rendered into chicken feed, which could have been fed to cattle by at least three farmers. All their susceptible animals were subsequently slaughtered and tested, and none was found to be infected.

This single example already showed that cattle cannibalism is still prevalent in Canada, just as it had been in all other countries with a simple ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban in place. Was this the first time the CFIA checked? It seems no one has been charged for feeding chicken or pig feed to cattle during the past six years.

BSE cows tend to become infected early in their lives. The Alberta BSE cow was presumably born in 1997, perhaps after the introduction of the inefficient feed ban. Since then, BSE had plenty of time to spread throughout the Canadian cattle herd.

The CFIA urgently needs to introduce a new feed ban if the spread of BSE is to be halted. Cattle protein must be entirely removed from the feed market and be banned from cattle, chicken and pig feed.

Nothing less will do.

Dr. Manfred Weissenbacher has written a book on BSE and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease that has been published in five languages, including German, Japanese and Italian.