

Burying heads over mad cow

BY THOMAS WALKOM

Ottawa's reaction to the latest case of mad cow disease is curious. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy is a health issue. People who eat BSE-infected meat can contract a fatal disease that chews holes in the brain. This is why politicians and media are paying so much attention to the story.

Yet the same politicians (and much of the media) are spending most of their energy insisting that there is no health problem. North American beef, we are told, is 100 per cent safe.

The initial reaction of U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman to news that a BSE-infected cow had been found in the U.S. was a plea to eat more beef. Canadian politicians haven't been much more inspired.

While federal Agriculture Minister Bob Speller has at least spared us the embarrassment of publicly chowing down on steak (Canadian politicians did that after the last "isolated incident" of BSE), he has focused almost exclusively on trying to reopen foreign markets.

This would be a laudable goal if the problems that caused countries like Japan, South Korea and Mexico to close their borders to Canadian beef had been dealt with. But they haven't. Over the past eight months, BSE has been found in two cows born in Canada. The argument that these are isolated incidents is wearing thin.

Yesterday, a Japanese inspection team warned that U.S. and Canadian cattle remain vulnerable to BSE and labelled safety measures by the two North American governments "inadequate."

The Japanese are right. Both Canada and the U.S. have adopted the ostrich approach to BSE. On Saturday, Prime Minister Paul Martin kept his head firmly in the sand when he said in Edmonton that he opposes mass testing of all cattle for BSE (as is done in Japan).

"I will give you the answer that has been given to me by the industry and by the scientists and the answer I am given is no (to mass testing)" he told reporters.

Scientists are far more divided than Martin suggests. Research from Stanley Prusiner, the University of California scientist who won a Nobel prize for his work on BSE, has found that the disease may not be confined to what government regulators called "specified risk materials" — cow brains and nerve matter — but may be present in muscle meats such as steaks and roasts, as well as blood.

Yet, Martin certainly is speaking for the beef industry. Ranchers, slaughterhouses and renderers have dictated Canadian and U.S. government policies toward BSE.

True, Canada has banned the practice of feeding chopped up cow bits to cattle and other ruminants (animals with two stomachs).

But this so-called protein can still be fed to chickens and pigs, which can then be chopped up and fed to cattle (one particularly common variant is the feeding of so-called poultry litter — feathers and excrement scraped from henhouse floors — to cows).

As well, the ban never applied to cows' blood and gelatin. Indeed, it is still both legal and common in Canada to feed cows' blood to calves (it's cheaper than milk).

More important, there is virtually no Canadian enforcement of those feed prohibitions that do exist. This was underscored last Thursday when Washington announced — in a release that got virtually no attention here — that it is placing six Canadian feed mills on "import alert" after finding prohibited meat material in their product.

If the Americans hadn't noticed the problems with the offending mills, no one else would have, certainly not the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

In its ongoing efforts to downplay any potential health risks that might hurt the beef industry, the CFIA is reluctant to widely publicize even those actions it does take.

Last Tuesday, for instance, the agency quietly informed the beef industry of a new regulation temporarily banning so-called "downers" — cattle so sick or injured they cannot stand — from those slaughterhouses that export to the U.S.

But it chose not to issue a press release, or to place this announcement on the portion of its Web site aimed at the general public, many of whom assume that diseased cattle are already automatically excluded from the human food chain.

So far, the government's sleepy-time approach has been without cost, politically. No one has died yet and most media are content to treat the mad cow story as a trade issue affecting ranchers rather than a public health matter affecting eaters.

Given that the chance of contracting the human version of mad cow from infected beef seems low (although here, too, scientists are split) some argue that this is a problem not worth fretting over.

Perhaps. Yet one could make the same argument about terrorism. The likelihood of being murdered by Osama bin Laden is infinitesimal compared with the likelihood of being killed on Highway 401. And yet we worry, not entirely irrationally, about bin Laden.

It's strange that mad cow doesn't merit at least a portion of the same respect.