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U.S. hiding mad cow cases: Expert

By Kelly Egan

Are the Americans being truthful about the extent of mad cow disease on their own soil?

Many is the area farmer with suspicions, perhaps with good reason.

Since May 2003, four animals have tested positive for the disease that devastated the beef industry in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. Three of the positives were in Canada, the fourth was in Washington state, but in an animal born and raised in Alberta.

Now, consider that the U.S. has something like 100 million cattle; Canada about 15 million. In practice, the markets had become closely integrated, with tens of thousands of animals regularly crossing the border. As well, feeding practices in the two countries were very similar.

After the first positive test, the Americans shut their border to Canadian cattle, citing protection of their own herd. The consequences here have been devastating, with economic losses in the billions. Much finger-wagging has ensued, including many visits from leading U.S. experts.

South of the border, meanwhile, everything looked squeaky clean.

Lester Friedlander thinks he can explain the puzzle. He thinks a coverup is under way.

Mr. Friedlander is a former veterinarian with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and, since he left in 1995, now a well-known whistleblower. He used to supervise meat inspection at a slaughterhouse in Pennsylvania that processed 1,800 cows a day, including many "downers," or suspect animals no longer able to walk.

In April, he intends to travel to Ottawa to speak to parliamentarians reviewing our rules for food inspection. They're in for an earful.

Mr. Friedlander says, flat out, that mad cow is probably prevalent in the U.S., but has so far been kept out of the public eye. "There's no doubt in my mind."

Mr. Friedlander said he was one of the first government vets to begin looking for mad cow in the late 1980s when he used to extract cattle brains and send them to labs for testing.

In the early 1990s, he said he was speaking to the USDA's chief pathologist about mad cow when the following exchange took place:

"Lester, if you ever find mad cow disease, promise me one thing?" he was asked. "What's that?" he responded. "Don't tell anybody."

Mr. Friedlander says he would take a lie-detector test to back up his story. "Once I heard that, then I knew this whole thing was a joke," he concluded.

Mr. Friedlander, who is still involved in a lawsuit with the U.S. government, says it defies logic that only three or four cattle in North America have the disease.

The problem, he explained, can be traced to the way cattle are fed. Until 1997, it was common to use rendered cattle remains as a component in cattle feed. Both countries stopped the practice at roughly the same time.

"We all know it isn't isolated. You can't tell me one cow got it," he said from his home near Scranton-Wilkes-Barre. "The only way one cow could get it is if you took a bag of feed and said 'Elsie, this is your bag of feed. Doris, this is your bag of feed.'

"They don't feed cattle like that. It comes in bulk. They're all eating from the same contaminated source."

The U.S. is one of the great cattle exporting nations of the world. Obviously, there is a deep concern about keeping its herd BSE-free. To that end, testing has greatly increased. Since June 1, 2004, more than 252,000 animals have been tested in the U.S., roughly the same ratio as in Canada.

However, Mr. Friedlander alleges the Americans have not pursued a handful of "false positive" tests with enough rigour. "The U.S. isn't any better than Canada. Except Canada was a little more truthful and came out and dealt with the problem. That's what I'm trying to tell the USDA," he argues.

"Why don't you fess up to it already and say, 'OK, the animal was positive, what can we do now to get everything back to normal'. Instead of just covering it up, covering it up, whenever you get a false positive."

There have been some embarrassing moments for the U.S. inspection program. In 2003, it was testing only 20,000 animals a year and targeting mostly "downer" cattle considered high-risk.

The USDA credited its approach with detecting the Washington State animal.

However, in February 2004, a congressional committee heard from three witnesses who insisted the positive animal was not a downer at all. There was much clamouring about whether this fact subverted the government's whole testing program.

Is there a pattern here, one can't help wonder, when it comes to dealing with news that reflects badly on the national character?

When Ben Johnson cheats with steroids, for example, we undergo a public inquiry, a collective crucifixion, if you will, broadcast to the world.

The American sprinters? Nah. A little speedbump here and there, but otherwise, it's all good. Barry Bonds? Heh, it was just a little muscle cream. How was he supposed to know?

And now this. Our cattle industry, crippled by a closed border, is being ruined over animals that never got into the food chain.

Tastes like beef?

Maybe, but something sure smells fishy from here.