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The worst of all worlds: another mad cow
By MARGARET WENTE

When I reached him on his cellphone yesterday, Cam Ostercamp was moving cows in the middle of a blizzard. "Flies are not a problem in southern Alberta today," he told me. Like every other cattle farmer, he's been hit hard by mad-cow disease. He has remortgaged and restructured and burned up all his equity. And he says that you and I and every other Canadian should be mad as hell over the bovine spongiform encephalopathy debacle. "We've reached into your pocket to the tune of \$2.5-billion. We've pissed away a king's ransom, and the problems are just as big as ever."

A devastated industry. Billions paid in relief to struggling farmers. Feedlots repossessed; farming families broken apart by the stress. All this, accompanied by constant reassurances from various officials that the mad-cow crisis is really, really under control this time. No need to worry. Except that now we've got another one. Another mad cow, another mystery about how it was infected, a border that might not open again after all. Are we just victims of bad luck? Or has somebody badly bungled this?

The answer is, somebody has badly bungled this. Make that several somebodies, led by your federal government, your watchdogs at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and the cattle industry itself. They're still in denial, desperately hoping the problem will go away. Meantime, almost everyone who knows something about mad cows says this latest case is no surprise.

"It was entirely predictable," says William Leiss, a risk-management expert at the University of Ottawa. "The line is always, 'It's under control because we've got the feed ban.' "

Mad-cow disease is transmitted through contaminated feed that contains the ground-up bits of other diseased cows. The prions that make an animal diseased are almost indestructible and, once in the food supply, they stay there for a very long time. The risk to human health from eating a mad cow is very low. But the economic risk of BSE is very high. So far, it has cost this country more than \$5-billion in lost markets and bailouts.

"The issue is not human health risk," says Mr. Leiss. "The issues involve unacceptable failures in risk assessment, sloppy surveillance programs for animal disease control, and a stubborn refusal to impose a total ban on recycling ruminant protein in animal feed."

Canada's feed ban is far from complete and far from foolproof. Some feed that's prohibited for cattle may not be labelled properly. Banned and non-banned feed can get mixed up at the farm. Until recently, compliance was voluntary. And Canada still allows ruminant blood in calf feed, a practice banned in the U.S. Six years ago, Health Canada said we should ban blood in calf feed. The scientist who discovered prions, the source of BSE, has called the use of blood a "really stupid idea."

It all adds up to grim news. "We may have a new generation of infected animals," warns Mr. Leiss.

BSE probably came to Canada (and probably the U.S. as well) from Britain, where it destroyed the beef industry. But the Canadian Food Inspection Agency underestimated the risk that BSE would pop up here. So did the cattle industry and the politicians. They ignored the fact that even one mad cow would have devastating consequences. The international rules at the time were clear: A single case was sufficient to exclude a country from export markets for seven years.

But they all kept reassuring us that the risk was "negligible." After all, the "science" said so. And nobody was interested in large-scale testing. That would cost money. Besides, the more we tested, the more likely it was that we would turn up bad news.

Meantime, cattle farmers were building up their herds to feed the rapidly expanding U.S. export market. They had no idea of the economic risk. By the time mad cow struck, they were exporting at least 65 per cent of their production. It didn't matter that nobody had got sick. The damage was done.

France tests a quarter of its cows, and Japan tests every single one. Canada has been content to follow the U.S., which tests very few cows, and only sick ones. (Almost everyone believes the U.S. has failed to detect or covered up its own mad-cow cases.) And now we have the worst of all worlds. The Americans can hammer us again if they want, and our credibility with other potential foreign customers is nil.

"We're getting to the end of our tether," says Mr. Ostercamp. "We can't navigate the debris much longer."