



Ignoring mad cow at our peril

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Any beef eater wondering why the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency (CFIA) is struggling with its fourth mad cow and a \$5-billion economic disaster need look no farther than a lengthy risk assessment prepared for Health Canada five years ago.

The 2,000-page report carefully examined the science on mad cows and concluded that "BSE is silently incubating" in our beef herds for a host of reasons. The report, which never saw the light of day, also explains why our food agency has spent the last two years denying, minimizing and fudging the facts about mad cow disease and why mad cows and other mad health risks could remain with us for decades.

For starters, the report noted that the BSE risk was never "negligible," as the government then pretended. One of the primary risks came from imported cattle from the United Kingdom, where mad cow disease originated, between 1982 and 1990. The report concluded that many of these animals were probably infected with BSE and that as many as 45 possibly "entered the human and animal feed chain."

Canada also opened other doors to BSE by importing cattle blood, cattle tallow (fat) and veterinary products. And we bought 100,000 kilograms of animal feed from France in 1999, a country that went on to sprout one of Europe's worst BSE epidemics.

The report examined the so-called "fire wall" feed ban and found lots of fires but no walls. It noted that BSE can be transmitted by cattle eating cattle bits in animal feed, but described the ban as purely a voluntary one or as it put it, "largely an honour system monitored by CFIA." The monitoring consisted of looking at company documents.

The ban was also highly selective and permissive. It still allowed cattle blood (a high-risk source banned in the United States last year), to be fed to calves. It still allowed chicken and pork bits to be fed to cows and allowed cattle parts, in turn, to be cooked up and fed back to chickens and pigs.

The report noted that the country had about 10,000 on farm feed manufacturers -- farmers or feedlot owners who mixed and prepared their own feed. None were registered and none were inspected.

It also found other troubling practices. Renderers, for example, were allowed to use diseased animals with TB, road kill, supermarket waste and even household pets or "companion animals" for cattle feed.

Many pages in the study are devoted to the "leaky" nature of feed bans because cross-contamination is a fact of life in factory feed mills. Studies of Swedish, British and Italian feeds all found traces of cattle meat and bone meal in feeds long after feed bans took effect, as have Canadian studies.

In sum, the courageous risk assessment concluded that BSE was here and that its companion human disease, variant CJD, was incubating in the human population. The possibility of a BSE risk "exists in Canada must be acknowledged," pleaded the report's two authors, Joan Orr and Mary Ellen Starodub.

The agency, however, buried the assessment and promoted the fiction that BSE did not exist in Canada. But "one stinking cow" after another has rudely exposed the agency's irresponsible economic gamble.

William Leiss, one of the nation's pre-eminent risk analysts and a professor at the University of Ottawa, now argues that CFIA has put the industry into indefinite jeopardy by refusing to plug all the holes identified by the 2000 report. Leiss calls the permissive feed ban "a pile crap" and wonders why cattle blood hasn't been banned. (Even one CFIA bureaucrat admitted last month that current rules "provide opportunities for prohibited proteins to be accidentally included in or cross-contaminate feeds.")

Leiss also can't understand why chicken and pig protein is still being recycled through cattle, a risky practice outlawed in Europe. He suspects that the food agency's BSE minimizers are now in big trouble because "they don't have a clue about where the latest infection came from. They are just spinning tales."

But the latest Alberta case also raises something of a mystery. The 2000 report clearly identified the nation's dairy herds as the most at risk for BSE. That's because Canadian dairy cows have always been fed more animal protein and bone meal than beef cows (up to 400 grams per day). For this reason, nearly two-thirds of all mad cows in the U.K. have come from dairy herds. Most of Canada's dairy herd is located in Ontario and Quebec. Yet, to date, BSE hasn't showed up in the most exposed and under-tested population of at-risk cows. Why?

Leiss thinks that we have had lots of BSE cases but "CFIA hasn't found them" due to a low-level permissive surveillance system that only tested 8,000 animals last year.

But the predominance of Alberta cases might also indicate another problem, other than contaminated feed. Cattle protein in animal feed as well as insecticides were originally identified as the two biggest risk factors for the BSE outbreak in England. Could there be other environmental factors at work in Alberta, such as airborne pollutants that can fold good proteins in the brain into bad hole-making prions?

One thing remains certain. Until beef eaters and politicians demand a proper accounting of CFIA's risky behaviours in the last four years, there will be more mad cows and more mad economics.

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