

# BUSINESS EDGE

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## Ignore modern-day prophets at peril of people and economy

I admire prophets. Real prophets. The ones who can SEE the future.

Bradford Duplisea is one of those people. Back in September, he wrote a prescient letter to the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* in which he said that Canadian cattle had a high probability of having been infected with mad cow disease. He said it would be a "miracle" if they had not.

There was no miracle. Last week, the Alberta cattle industry faced what will surely be a bigger economic challenge than the recent drought. Cattle farmers were reportedly losing \$11 million per day. Canadian beef-product exports were halted to countries that comprise our biggest customers, especially the U.S. Some auctions were put on hold and packers are cutting production.

This was all because of one "mad cow", but the suspicion that other cows are similarly infected is inescapable. Last year our cattle ranchers were worried about supply. Today, the much greater fear is about demand. No country wants suspect meat.

Duplisea is a health and food safety researcher who often works for the Canadian Health Coalition (CHC). His timely prediction that we would find bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the technical name for the invariably fatal disease we call mad cow, in Canadian-bred cattle was based on some grim facts backed up by some credible sources.

He was concerned because (1) Canada only does minimal random testing for BSE, (2) our government has still not completely banned by-proteins from being used for feed, and (3) the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been having difficulty tracking all of the suspect animals and animal parts that have come to its attention in the past decade.

His argument was that we were living in a state of wilful ignorance, and it was only a matter of time before reality would strike, as it did last week. His evidence was gathered from such agencies as the World Health Organization, which in 1998 recommended banning the recycling of all animal protein; the European Commission, which had given Canada a second-tier BSE risk ranking (even before the mad cow was diagnosed); and the Canadian

Food Inspection Agency's own information regarding its tracking of animals.

Irony rests in the notion that the Canadian Cattlemen's Association disputed Duplisea's conclusions last fall. Denial is no way to deal with potential BSE. If anyone should have been advocating increased inspections and stricter controls, it should have been the cattlemen themselves. They are now paying the price.

It's the classic bind: short-term pain vs. long-term gain.

We need cattle ranchers with vision, ones who can see the damage that short-term thinking does to the confidence of their customers.

But we also need provincial and federal governments that act definitively when diseases such as BSE approach. Why did it take until 1997 for the feds to ban feeding ruminant to ruminant? And why is it still allowable to feed rendered pig protein to cattle, or rendered cattle to chickens?

Why did it take more than three months for the provincial government to test this cow's brain, when Marwyn Peaster, the farmer who took the cow to slaughter, claims the animal could not even stand up on its own, the classic symptom of BSE?

Duplisea was ignored when his advice could have headed off trouble with a capital T. When I phoned him last week, he said our top priority must be "to stop recycling animal protein. Because people

make mistakes. Cows eat out of chicken feed. People use the wrong feed sometimes. Whether it's greed or human error, you cannot take chances with this."

It's time to start heeding a wise man's advice.

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While I'm frustrated with the lack of seriousness that our government has given this issue up until now, I want to put the health risk in context. The economic risks are staggering, but increasingly it looks as if the health risks are minor.

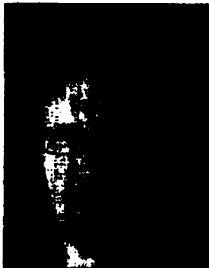
For one, BSE globally is much less serious health-wise and even economically than, for example, SARS. For two straight years the new cases of the human form of BSE, called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), has been declining in the U.K., the most seriously affected country. Universally, only 140 or so people have contracted and died from vCJD since 1986. By contrast, thousands have contracted SARS and more than 500 have died from it in only a few months.

Two, we finally seem to have identified the causative agent, known as a prion. Though much needs to be learned and mystery still surrounds BSE, the decreasing prevalence of this disease among cattle in England is enough to give me confidence that we are learning to control its spread. In 1992, the Brits intercepted 36,000 BSE-infested cattle, but they found only 510 last year.

I'm not saying the world might not still face a major vCJD health crisis. But so far, all the people who have died of vCJD shared a similar genetic marker. The vast majority of us, therefore, may have inherent genetic protection. Pessimistically, vCJD may simply take longer to incubate among the general population. We won't know until a few generations have passed.

Considering the unknowns, it is sensible for the U.S. government to be hyper-cautious and shut down imports for a while. I only wish we had been so cautious on this side of the border.

### OPINION



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*Business Edge*