

Calgary Herald (FRONT PAGE)

also National Post & Ottawa Citizen

August 29, 2003

Mad cow threat underrated Food agency unconcerned about affect on humans

By Bill Curry
CanWest News Service

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency did not consider mad cow disease a human health concern one year after European scientists concluded it could be transferred to humans, according to documents obtained by CanWest News.

The damning conclusion was reached by senior Health Canada officials responsible for monitoring the disease, according to papers obtained under the Access to Information Act.

"The CFIA does not appear to see BSE as a human health issue; instead they appear to see it as an animal health issue," states a Health Canada document from an Oct. 30, 1997, meeting with the then-recently created federal agency responsible for food safety and animal screening.

Canadian Alliance agriculture critic Howard Hilstrom said the document raises concern about Canada's response.

"The perception of the world's countries was that it was a health issue, so for the CFIA to say that it was not a health issue was a bad mistake on their part."

The documents also reveal that senior Health Canada officials were told not to take notes during meetings to protect confidentiality of discussions.

"General meeting rules were discussed with regard to confidentiality," it states. "Any (and) everything that was discussed in confidence in these meetings should remain that. Notes should not be taken."



"I don't know why this whole thing was so confidential in 1997," said Hilstrom. "Britain had been dealing with this for some time, the European countries (as well). It's a lack of openness on the part of Health Canada.

Hilstrom was surprised by the secrecy surrounding the meetings as revealed by the documents.

"What's more astounding is that only now are Canada, the United States and Mexico working with the OIE in establishing the more current set of practical rules. Now if that (Health Canada) discussion had been open to the public, maybe this work on the international front would have started in 1997 instead of starting it now after we've been hammered economically," he said.

Since a single cow tested positive for BSE in May, 34 countries banned Canadian beef, pushing many cattle ranchers to the verge of bankruptcy.

Some have recently said they would lift their bans including Mexico and the U.S.

On Thursday the U.S. Department of Agriculture started issuing import permits for for some forms of Canadian beef, beginning the process that will see cross-border beef shipments beginning within days.

The CFIA's chief veterinarian, Dr. Brian Evans, said on Thursday that while he was not present at the 1997 meeting, he could only assume some scientists may have still been debating the then-recently discovered link between mad cow disease and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, the human form of the brain-wasting illness.

Evans pointed out that the TSE Team is now jointly run by Health Canada and CFIA, and both branches agree BSE is a human and animal health issue.

Health Canada spokeswoman Jirina Vlk insisted yesterday that members of the TSE Team do take notes at their meetings and downplayed the official's comments regarding the CFIA.

TSE stands for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy, a family of diseases characterized by sponge-like lesions in the brain. In cows, it is called bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or Mad Cow disease and in humans it is called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

The documents were obtained by Ottawa-based researcher Bradford Duplisea.

At a meeting one year later, members of the TSE team, including Diane Kirkpatrick, the director general of Health Canada's Veterinary Drugs Directorate and Dr. Jeffrey Farber, director of the department's bureau of microbial hazards, warned CFIA that Canada's policy of allowing animal blood to be rendered back into animal feed could not be considered "safe."

In light of mad cow cases in Europe, the CFIA instituted a ban in 1997 on grinding animal parts into animal feed, a process known as "rendering" which has been cited as the main source of transmission of the disease. However blood was exempt from the ban because it was not considered a risk.

Evans said a Canadian ban on rendering blood is under "active consideration."