Open Sesame? Waiting at border.

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With the US election finally behind us, one of two things should now happen. If, as Ottawa bureaucrats and their industry cheerleaders contend, U.S. agriculture secretary Anne Veneman and company have been just waiting till after the election to reopen the American border to Canadian beef, then it should soon spring open like a well-oiled gate.

And by mid-November, Canada should have in hand Washington's firm commitment to precisely when that will occur.

If, by Nov. 15th, no such assurances are on the table, Ottawa must launch an immediate trade challenge of Washington's 18-month closure of the American border to Canadian beef and live cattle, which was an act of trade protectionism Veneman herself admits has no scientific basis.

Under both the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization, the trade rights of Canada's ranchers are clear. Defending those rights is not just the cattlemen's fight; it's agriculture's fight. If Ottawa can so abandon the trade interests of Canada's ranchers, no farm sector is safe.

I am reminded of trade lawyer Michael Woods' question when we first spoke 14 months ago of Ottawa's failure to launch a NAFTA Chapter 20 defense of Canada's ranchers: "What I don't understand" Woods said, "is why Canada's *ranchers* are *putting up with it...*"

Why indeed? As Canada's ranchers head off to regional gatherings, Wood's question begs an answer.

What caused the clear disconnect between the interests of ranchers and the position of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association on BSE? Why, under pressure, did the CCA appear to circle the wagons and fail to consider a trade action?

Why has Ottawa not been pressed by CCA to invoke NAFTA or WTO dispute mechanisms to defend the trade rights of Canada's ranchers?

Why did industry "insiders" suddenly become "outsiders" when they questioned CCA's handling of the BSE affair? Why is the US border still closed? What other sector of Canada's economy would put up with this? Why have Canada's ranchers?

"Too many people around the CCA board table are economically tied to the packing plants," suggests one Saskatchewan rancher who called to discuss the beef trade crisis.

Canada's highly concentrated packing plants have made a killing, literally and figuratively, since the US border closed in May 2003.

Benefiting from a captive supply of cattle and rock bottom live prices, they've cashed in on high margins while collecting disaster relief cheques intended to assist independent ranchers. Last May, the packers thumbed their noses at Parliament's request for financial disclosure.

Because packers have the market power to punish suppliers, directors feeding cattle — whether on contract or as independents — can find themselves in a conflict of interest when considering positions unsupported by the packing sector.

This, according to one Saskatchewan rancher, can result in "kowtowing to the packers at the expense of the ranchers."

But others industry insiders suggest the problem is a more familiar one: director inexperience and a lack of strong governance skills. In an atmosphere where Board discussion and dissent is discouraged, the majority of Board Members are intimidated by a few entrenched Directors and staff, whose will carries the organization.

In an attempt to sidestep political cow pies quickly littering the road, the feds are now publicly suggesting Ottawa's failure to mount an appropriate trade defense is, in fact, the fault of the CCA, who, they say, "never asked for one..."

Which begs the question: since when is public policy up to the industry? It's certainly not the role of the private sector to coach Ottawa on how to act in the trade interest of Canada's farmers.

That having been said, CCA's failure to openly and assertively press Ottawa for an early and effective trade defense has clearly prolonged the financial crisis.

No one wants to see CCA falter as a respected voice for Canada's ranchers. But to maintain it's right to speak, CCA must learn to listen to its constituents, to worry less about angering Ottawa and more about representing vigorously the policy and trade interests of its members.

Like a fire truck pulling up to your home and never connecting the hose, Ottawa's failure to invoke NAFTA/WTO rights to protect the trade interests of Canada's ranchers is shocking, and it's not over yet.

Go to your regional meetings and speak your mind on this one. For Canada's sake, and the sake of her communities.