

Like barn flies to cowpies...

(A barnyard conversation)

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Little Red Hen: Well, well, well, Cow! And how are you? Good to be back! You're looking quite stressed. What's the matter?

Cow: Oh Hen, things have been terrible in the Barnyard since you left, what, a year ago?

Hen: 14 months, to be precise.

Cow: Right. By the way, did you have any trouble at the border?

Hen: Did!! They gave me a terrible time! I really don't know why... Kept talking about AI this and AI that... I said son, at my age, artificial insemination is the LAST THING I'm likely to have been exposed to...

Cow: No, no... I'll fill you in on that later. But first, did you hear about the Mad Cow thing?

Hen: So old Barney broke out of his bull pasture again? What else is new!

Cow: No, No. Mad Cow disease! BSE. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. The media is only now - after a year - learning to pronounce it...

Hen: A year? Why for heavens sake has it been in the news for a year? Have our herds been wiped out? How many cattle have died?

Cow: Well, we know of ONE case, but she didn't actually *die* from BSE, it was the stun gun at the...

Hen: Wait a minute, ONE CASE? So what's the problem, then?

Cow: Well, you know the Americans – find an excuse for trade protectionism and they're all over it like barn flies on cowpies. Washington slammed the border shut last May. International panel cleared Canada of any health risk by the third week in June. Under NAFTA, the Canada-US border should have been open by Canada Day.

Hen: So how long did it take?

Cow: Never happened. Went from 100% closed to 60% closed in September, and has stayed like that for nine months. Live cattle are in over-supply; prices to ranchers are in the basement... Herds are increasing...

Hen: So, let me get this right... You mean, the problem isn't that our cattle are dying, it's that our cattle are eating?

Cow: Right. And ranchers can't afford to feed them. They can't afford to ship them. They can't afford to pay their bills. It's a real mess...

Hen: But with that international report, Ottawa had NAFTA rights to call for an opening of that border on Canada Day. You say we're STILL waiting for a ruling? How long did Ottawa wait before filing?

Cow: Ah, that would be another thing that never happened...

Hen: Surely, you jest...

Cow I wish. Canadian cattle industry spokesmen got danced around by American lawyers and Ottawa bureaucrats into supporting a “soft approach”. Soft in the head is more like it. The sheep in the north pasture are convinced it’s Mad Bureaucrat disease – say their brains are deteriorating...

Hen: But with prices so low, Canadian beef must be flying off the shelves...?

Cow That’s the other thing... Retail prices have remained high. Canada’s two packers - Tyson and Cargill - have made more money from a couple of plants in Canada than all their US operations combined.

Hen: What are the ranchers doing about this?

Cow What can they do? Their industry leaders are telling them they’re lucky. Their bankers are telling them they’re overextended. Their politicians are telling them the US border will re-open “any week now” but have been singing this same song since last September. Meanwhile, third-generation ranches are going on the block... There’ll be suicides, I warn you Hen... It’s awful.

Hen: Surely Ottawa has put in place compensation?

Cow Ad hoc payments for a few months of feed. Nowhere near what’s needed. And wait till you hear this: the American cattle lobby is threatening to target any BSE disaster relief as an unfair trade subsidy.

Hen: Well, THAT must have provoked some strong words from Canada.

Cow Not really. Cattle industry leaders seem more afraid of annoying their American friends than angering their own producers. Hen, they’ve sent nothing but steers to defend us... And I’m beginning to hear the same limp excuse for delaying an A.I. disaster relief package for the Fraser Valley. Better be careful. Could be considered a subsidy. Don’t want to anger the Americans.

Hen: Cow, really! Birds dying from artificial insemination? Roosters certainly have their faults, but no hen would be foolish enough to risk death just to...

Cow No, no. AI as in *Avian Influenza*. The Fraser Valley outbreak in March sent some 19 million birds to their death as a pre-requisite to reopen the borders.

Hen: But we’re supply managed... why should borders be that important?

Cow Maybe because \$80 million in poultry products cross the border each year, in both directions.

Hen: What?

Cow Yup. And half are live – must be hatchery chicks – and in the past two years, some 22% came from AI-positive States. Of course, no mention of THAT on the news...

Hen: But it’s like BSE - if the US has AI too, and we test before slaughter to ensure there is no health risk, why close the border to dressed poultry?

Cow Like barn flies to cowpies, Hen, like barn flies to cowpies... Any excuse for protectionism and they’re all over it.

Hen: My goodness. This is terrible. All in one year? Who will be next? What must our farmers be thinking? But wait, I’ve come back with some interesting information...

NEXT MONTH: The Little Red Hen unpacks her bags...