

# CBC Commentary January 8, 2004

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For the first time in a long time, I'm actually feeling optimistic for Canada's ranchers. Finding a BSE-positive cow in the US put the shoe on the other foot. Where that cow was born — turns out it WAS Canada — is immaterial. Farmers in both countries have fed their animals commercial feeds and supplements containing re-cycled animal proteins. Ergo, the risk profiles of the Canadian and American herds are identical.

We learned back in the 90's that feed containing meat and bone-meal derived from other ruminants could pass on diseases to our cattle, and so banned its practice. In both Canada and the US. In the same month — August of 1997.

The point is, both American and Canadian cattle were exposed to an identical risk. Two Harvard studies — one released by the USDA in October — estimate there may be up to 100 geriatric, BSE-positive cows in American herds, And maybe 5-10 in Canada. Less now since we've found these two!

Like needles in a haystack, the health risk is **below** minimal — the real issue is watching out for these few old cows and removing them from the food chain.

But most important for Canada's ranchers, the discovery of BSE in an American herd finally puts the shoe on the other foot. It makes little difference where the cow was born. It makes little difference there is no health risk. America's ranchers — like Canada's ranchers — are now shut out of traditional export markets because trade decisions are largely governed by politics. Not science. Look at Japan.

Without this case of BSE in the States, I don't believe for a moment that the Canadian border would have been open by February. (More like October, given the US politics of elections and the rural vote) Ottawa was unwilling to play the NAFTA card. And the soft approach wasn't working; Washington controlled both the time line and the agenda.

With the U.S. frozen out of dozens of international markets it now finally has the incentive to get the lead out.

Canada's Agriculture Minister has done exactly the right thing. By closing our border to US cattle and higher-risk beef products until the Americans clear their own "sound science and risk" hurdle, Canada is acting prudently.

Once cleared by an international panel (in Canada, this took a month) American ranchers — under NAFTA — have access rights to Canada's markets and Canada — the fair player at the table — has a golden opportunity to honour those rights, open the border and embarrass the Americans into doing the same.

The real danger to Canada's ranchers is our highly concentrated meat packing sector. Until prices recover, governments must provide the financial support necessary to ensure independent ranchers and feed lot operators remain standing. Because NONE OF THIS is their fault. And to do less would be bad public policy.

For Commentary, I'm Wendy Holm on Bowen Island