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## **Canada's BSE Experience: Maintaining Public Confidence In The Face of Global Threats**

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### **Introduction**

Since its emergence in 1986 in the United Kingdom, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) has become a global issue affecting twenty-three (23) countries to date and this number will undoubtedly grow even higher in the months and years to come.

Although the scientific understanding of the disease remains incomplete, a much greater understanding of the disease has emerged over the past seventeen years. The means to effectively manage the disease in terms of both animal and public health have been established and, as a result, international standards have evolved. Regrettably, the political will of the majority of countries to respect and implement these standards in their import policies has not thereby resulting in extraordinary and unwarranted economic consequences.

The current threat environment to public and animal health and food safety arising from globalization, climate change, emerging pathogens, agro-terrorism and other factors demands that approaches to prevention, preparedness, response and recovery extend seamlessly across the animal health and public health community and beyond national borders.

Fortunately, the potential for, and consequences of, accidental, incidental or deliberate introduction of animal, zoonotic or food safety pathogens risks in North America have been recognized for a number of years by regulatory officials. As a consequence, investments have been made over the past number of decades that provide a foundation for an integrated and expanded capacity. Regrettably not all sectors or levels of the animal and public health community are yet engaged. It is also recognized that the investments made to date have been modest in comparison to the magnitude of the challenge.

Of paramount importance to ensuring that the impacts of a significant food safety, public or animal health event can be managed in a responsive and responsible manner is the required additional investments that must be made in three key areas: effective risk communication to maintain public trust and consumer confidence; creating the environment that will minimize

the social and economic consequences of a finding; and establishing a seamless public and animal health community.

### **1. Maintenance of Public Trust and Consumer Confidence**

The repeated experience and lessons learned from untoward events at the international level in recent years is that the maintenance of public trust and consumer confidence must be a primary objective of any emergency management effort. In real economic terms, every country's domestic market is the primary market for its agricultural and agri-food industries. While the loss of international market access can certainly be devastating and have profound sociological impacts, the maintenance of a viable domestic market can, in the short term, provide a basis for the sustaining of hope, capacity and infrastructure for longer term recovery.

The praise for Canada's transparency and risk communication in the face of the detection of BSE has been very gratifying. Some have called it a new standard which all countries should aspire to achieve.

The tangible result of this investment has been demonstrated both at the economic and public trust level. Consumers in Canada have continued to demonstrate their confidence in the food inspection and animal health programs in place in an unprecedented manner. Unlike other countries who saw crises in consumer confidence following the finding of BSE, in Canada the consumption of beef actually rose by 60 - 70% in the July/August period of 2003 over the year previous. There can be no doubt that the continued demonstration of confidence by Canadians has had an influence on other countries decisions to resume trade. It is also obvious that the strong domestic market has provided the foundation for the economic recovery of the industry.

At the public trust level, the fact that there has been a sustained respect for the inspection system and the Government's overall management of the disease investigation has allowed for a reasoned environment conducive to rational public policy development. This has also been remarkably in contrast to the situation experienced in other countries where the loss of public and consumer confidence dictated that measures introduced were directed at restoring trust and required that the approaches adopted went well beyond that dictated by science.

The sustaining of public trust in an emergency is often predicated on the public's understanding of the potential for such an event, the existence of a decision making process that is both evidence and values based and timely, transparent and consistent communication. In a similar manner, emergency management activities should strive, where possible, to provide for utility and respect for societal values in the outcomes. For example, in the face of a major disease outbreak which is not zoonotic in nature, the salvage value of animals which must be destroyed, alternatives to destruction, disposal that respects environmental integrity and animal welfare considerations are important parameters for public and consumer acceptance.

### **2. Minimizing Social and Economic Consequences**

It is evident that no two countries experience with BSE is exactly the same. A country's circumstance is the cumulative result of five distinct factors:

- the route of exposure (live animals vs feed imports)
- the volume of exposure
- the scope of mitigation measures in place before the disease is detected
- the length of time that such measures have been in place
- the overall compliance and effectiveness of enforcement of such measures

Based on full consideration of the five factors described above, the Terrestrial Animal Health Code of the Office International des Epizooties (O.I.E.), the world organization for animal health, has established science based approaches for safe trade in both live animals and animal products. Unfortunately, the response of countries to ban imports from a country which has expressed BSE is not only inconsistent with these standards but serves as a deterrent to countries to make appropriate investments in infrastructure, surveillance and transparency in disease reporting. Such an environment of shoot, shovel and shut up only serves to increase the threat environment for all. There is an urgent need for international standard setting organizations to raise the visibility of the existing standards, to provide practical direction and guidelines to facilitate the uniform adoption of established standards by importing countries, to provide mediation services on a bilateral or multi-lateral basis and to recognize those countries which demonstrate leadership in respecting the recommendations.

Early detection is a critical factor to limiting the magnitude and impacts of a food safety or public/animal health emergency and such detection is a function of awareness, the sensitivity of surveillance systems and the incentives for reporting. It is equally recognized that the effectiveness of disease investigation efforts and the ability to limit consequences is a function of identification preservation and the quality of records.

### **3. Seamless Community**

Within Canada exists a considerable wealth of competencies and critical mass necessary for successful prevention, management and recovery elements. However, in spite of efforts to build organizational synergies and define shared outcomes, a common culture and establishment of trust takes time to achieve.

Given the continuum that exists from agricultural inputs through animal production systems resulting in food for human consumption and the subsequent recycling of by-products, it is important that the various disciplines and professional competencies work within a seamless public and animal health community to identify opportunities for strengthening inspection systems and more effective risk mitigation.

The finding of BSE has served to clearly demonstrate the vulnerability of industry sectors in a competitive global environment where disease presence and not product safety is the basis for import policy determinations. It has also served to demonstrate the interdependency of sectors. Species such as camelids, cervids, sheep and goats have seen their export opportunities lost in a very inappropriate manner, while at the domestic level, the strong support shown by the public in supporting the beef industry in its time of crisis through increasing the purchasing of beef has come at the cost of purchasing other sources of animal protein with resulting economic impacts on the poultry and pork industries.

Vulnerabilities have been identified in succession planning at the national level for critical scientific competencies such as board certified pathologists and epidemiologists which can only be addressed through a cohesive and seamless animal health-veterinary-public health community approach. The impact of fragmented or isolated decisions in the past to deal with fiscal pressures and debt management at the national, sub-national and academic level must be addressed through cohesive national strategies on the part of all players and stakeholders.

### **Conclusions**

There have been many lessons learned from the detection of BSE in Canada in May 2003. First and foremost, public trust is a sacred and must be earned each and every day through transparent, timely and consistent risk communication. Further cases of BSE in North America cannot be discounted. Nevertheless, given the measures in place over an extended period of time, it is not expected that the scope of the occurrence will mirror that which happened in Europe previously.

Secondly, decision making must be both evidence and values based. Although a scientific basis is essential to achieve the public policy objectives, the approach must also respect societal values and ensure that public health and animal health interests are the primary focus. The integrity and credibility of these programs are the foundation for economic opportunities and recovery.

Finally, we know much more about BSE than we did when the disease first emerged in the mid 1980's yet it still continues to garner public, media and international concern in a manner which is inconsistent with the relative animal and public health risk posed. The standards established by the O.I.E. as the recognized leading scientific reference body as the basis for safe trade are not the problem. It is the pattern of behaviour of importing countries to not reflect these standards as the basis for their import policy decisions which poses the biggest challenge to effectively managing BSE at the national and global level.

### **Abstract**

La détection de l'Encéphalite Spongiforme Bovine au Canada en 2003 a causé une crise économique associée à une perte au niveau des marchés d'exportations en dépit des standards internationaux existants et basés sur la science pour les échanges sécuritaires entre les pays. Cependant, la confiance, au niveau domestique des consommateurs et la confiance du public en général en ce qui concerne la salubrité des aliments et le système d'inspection canadien a été remarquable et a favorisé la reprise économique de l'industrie à un niveau jamais observé dans les autres pays ayant été aux prises avec cette problématique. Cette présentation donne un aperçu de trois facteurs critiques dans la gestion efficace en salubrité des aliments ou en santé animale et publique : la communication du risque, le respect des valeurs de la société dans le processus de décision et les efforts conjoints des intervenants en santé publique et vétérinaire.