

Farmers rally in Warkworth for BSE updates

by TOM PHILP
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It was the last place anyone would expect to see a crowd on a hot, late August evening; but it was exactly the place that about 300 concerned citizens of rural Northumberland wanted to be last Friday.

The Northumberland Federation of Agriculture (NFA), in cooperation with local cattle and Holstein associations, hosted an information session August 29 at the Warkworth arena. The intent was to give invited guest speakers an opportunity to update farmers and consumers on the latest developments in the "mad cow" crisis.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), known commonly as mad cow disease, was confirmed last May in one Alberta cow. Within days, the borders of more than 35 countries were closed to all Canadian exports of ruminant meat (beef, sheep, goats, etc.), and more than 2,700 beef cows were slaughtered for testing. With the American market closed to their products, thousands of Canadian farmers watched as the sale prices of their animals dropped from more than 70 cents per pound in May, to an average of less than 20 cents per pound by late August.

Two weeks ago the US border opened for certain boxed meat from Canada, but not soon enough to prop up an industry on the verge of collapse.

the extent to which the BSE crisis affects communities.

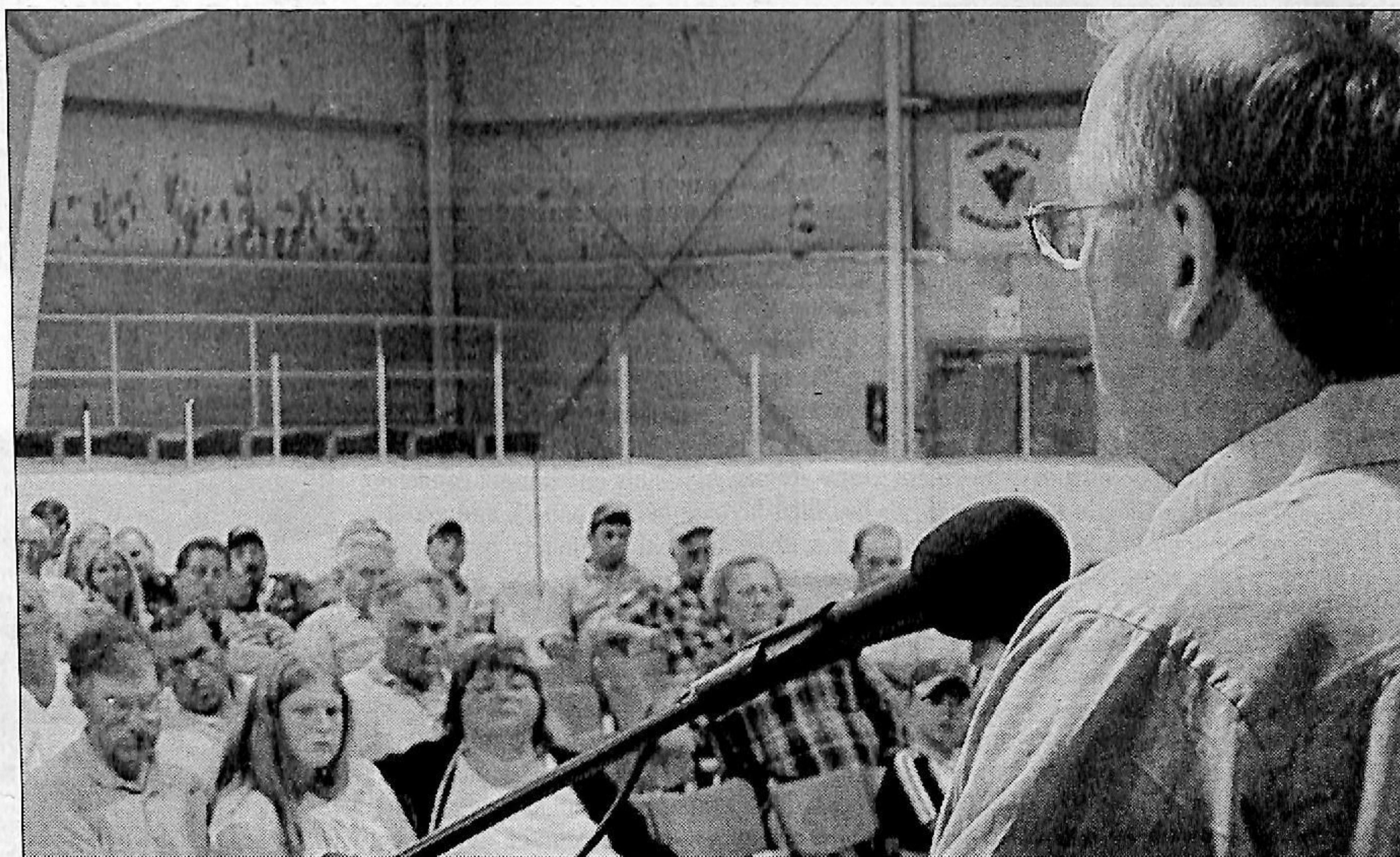
"It's not just about cattle," Hoskin said. "It's all agribusiness. There are lots of questions, and lots of concerns."

Panelists for Friday's rally included Kim Sisma, a director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA); Eric Barkey, an agriculture finance specialist with CIBC; Andy Svetec from Bob Mark New Holland Ford farm equipment; Dave DeNure, owner/auctioneer with Hoard's Station Sales Barn; Ralph McCartney, an officer with the BSE Recovery Program and Initiative; Dr. Doug Hayes, a veterinarian with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), Northumberland MPP Dr. Doug Galt, and Northumberland MP Paul Macklin.

Sisma, representing both OFA and the Ontario Cattlemen's Association said those groups are still waiting for a response from the federal government to their call for a "BSE crisis centre" through which an immediate "cash infusion" could be given to struggling farmers.

"We are still waiting on all fronts," she said. "It is absolutely critical that the federal government recognize the crisis in the beef industry."

Sisma said many of her members believe the federal government is delaying payments to cash-strapped farmers as a way to "blackmail" the Ontario government into signing the federal-provincial Agriculture Policy Framework



Northumberland MP Paul Macklin addresses last Friday's rally in support of the embattled beef industry.

Tom Philp photo

work together to find solutions to credit problems caused by the BSE crisis. Nearly 700,000 Ontario jobs, or about 11 per cent of the provincial work force, have been affected by BSE, but farmers have been hit the hardest financially.

"If you're looking for (financial) help, help is available," he said.

Svetec said farm equipment is one of the industries struggling right now, because most farmers have no cash for equipment replacement. In-

million in sales, through Hoard's Station. Farmers averaged about \$517 a head. After the BSE announcement this May, area cattlemen could sell only 3,900 animals, at an average of \$320 per head for exactly the same type of cattle, for total sales of about \$1.25 million as of last week.

"It's a major amount of money coming out of the (local) agriculture industry," DeNure said. "If you're getting 16 or 17 cents a cow now, you're looking at pretty good money."

has been "knocking loudly on the federal government's door" to provide adequate compensation to farmers. The Ontario economy alone has lost about \$23 million each week since May 20, he said.

"The solution is to get those borders completely open again," Dr. Galt said. "I believe that good science and common sense will ultimately prevail."

McCartney said this year's BSE crisis differs from previous bad situations in the cattle and sheep industries because the entire marketplace came to

have not yet been detected." The fact that CIFA moved quickly to isolate any possible spread of BSE after the May discovery shows the effectiveness of Canada's livestock monitoring system.

"Our system works. It's that simple," he said.

Macklin said Japan's demand for "purely" US beef, and its acceptance of the US school system template which uses only American products in school lunch programs, was instrumental in opening the border. Canadian officials met