

Politicians make few suggestions for beef farmers

By Suzanne Atkinson

Special to the Colborne Chronicle

The feds hung tough and the provincials cried foul. And Northumberland County beef farmers didn't get anything new at a beef crisis meeting held in Warkworth Friday.

Four hundred business people, beef and dairy farmers gathered to hear the latest from the politicians. With their livelihoods at stake, agri-business people were also supported by a smattering of consumers.

They were offered a carrot: there is more money available from the federal government. However, there's a catch.

"There are ongoing negotiations, but nothing has been finalized so there is no announcement yet," Northumberland MP Paul Macklin said. "The Ag Policy Framework — we have to find an answer there that will bring that to a conclusion."

Mr. Macklin refused to concede the government is trading that document for funding for the beef farmers. The document is a national policy paper which requires agreement from agriculture ministries across the country. Ontario commodity groups have criticized it saying it doesn't offer Ontario a fair deal.

Northumberland MPP Doug Galt said Ontario Minister of Agriculture Helen Johns has listened to the farmers and the federal government.

"There is no more money from the federal government to any province that is not signed up," the MPP said. "She will sign when the commodity groups say to sign."

"She's working hard to come up with something to ensure there is more support for you down the road," Dr. Galt said.

MP Macklin suggested farmers

send in petitions.

"You give me the ammunition," the federal representative urged. "I am there as an advocate for you," he said, pointing out Prime Minister Jean Chretien has more than once referred to him as "that lawyer who always wants more money for the farmers."

But Dr. Galt scoffed at the idea that petitions carry clout.

"Write a personal letter. That will go a long way," he said, pointing out there is still a lot that is not known about BSE, that it can develop in animals for up to seven years.

"Some say it's payback time for Canada. Maybe that's true," Dr. Galt said.

The politicians acknowledged Canada's multi-billion-dollar beef industry is wholly integrated with that of the United States. Canada does not have the facilities to debone beef as required under the terms of a limited border opening announced last month.

"When we find a problem in the supply chain we have to work together," Mr. Macklin said, explaining now a problem has been found, "the industry has to examine itself," to make sure it doesn't fall into this trap again. He said the industry must be wary of the potential of another animal not yet detected to carrying bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

"Once we have BSE, we are caught within the limitations" of the system, he said, explaining follow-up science has to be irrefutable.

"We have to demonstrate to the world that we have safe beef — that our system works. I know some are saying they wish the system hadn't worked," Mr.

Macklin said.

Canadian officials have already met with Japanese on this issue 49 times. "The process is going to continue," he said. "I'm hopeful it won't be long to getting the border open to live animals less than 30 months of age."

But he said there are a host of issues which need to be addressed: "The day the deficiency payments were announced the price dropped 20 cents per pound."

"There are tough questions to be asked about what has gone on in the industry."

Dr. Galt did agree with him on that point.

"Those profiteers need to be brought to justice," he said, suggesting there have been some practices which are "grossly unfair relating to contracts that have already been signed."

Dr. Galt said the scope of the problem has not been recognized outside of the rural community.

In delivering the speech provincial agriculture minister Helen Johns had planned, he applauded farmers for their resilience calling them the "backbone of the province."

"You have lot to be proud of," he said, pointing to Canadian animal health standards and surveillance procedures which caught the lone BSE-positive cow in the country.

The \$1.2-billion beef sector represents the second largest commodity group in the country and is being hit to the tune of \$23-million each week in Ontario, Dr. Galt said.

"The industry needs more help and we're knocking loudly on the door," he said, expressing, too, the hope "good science and common sense will prevail." He said Ms. Johns had travelled to Michigan to "advocate on behalf of farmers."

"The trade mission was productive in getting the American government to recognize the crisis. The Americans recognize their vulnerability to a single animal. We need new continent wide protocols," he said, adding "we need to keep spreading the word that livestock is safe."

Dr. Doug Hayes, the district veterinarian with Agriculture Canada, explained the science of BSE. The process of tracing the lone BSE-infected Alberta cow's life path was difficult. He said the infected animal's "assembled" herd had come from two lines and both lines, 2,700 animals, have been destroyed.

"Canadian beef doesn't present any significant risk," Dr. Hayes said, explaining that BSE tissue is concentrated in certain parts of the animal such as the brain, skull and intestines. As of July 24, all such parts are removed from animals less than 30 months of age sent to slaughter.

Dr. Hayes said the border won't be opened all at once.

"The majority of openings will be small steps. It's time-consuming and there are a whole set of guide lines that apply to us. Other countries are coming to realize that the guidelines are not really applicable because the industry is

so integrated," he said.

However, protocol changes take months and months, Dr. Hayes pointed out, because they have to be published first and the public offered an opportunity for comment.

Dealing with the issue is more than a matter of political pressure, Mr. Macklin said.

"We're trying to raise the standard in international trade to a science-based trade — to take out much of the subjectivity. We can't afford to be in a position where it is just a matter of political pressure. Science is a way to give it more objectivity," he said.

But the federal government was criticized by Ontario Cattlemen's Association (OCA) director Kim Systma for not doing enough.

"We need a co-ordinated lobby approach. We need you to call your MP and emphasize the need for the federal government to become more involved in this crisis," she said.

The OCA is looking at the feasibility of opening a slaughter facility for cull cows as well as a protocol to deal with dead stock, she said.

And, referring to last week's revelations of meat inspection problems at an Alymer slaughterhouse, Ms. Systma said, "Deadstock was in crisis before BSE."

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Her work in drama at E.N.S.S. may be over but Jocelyn Johnston picked up her reward in the awards presentations, walking off the stage with the Northumberland Players Youth Award.

Science, acknowledging her efforts in environmental activities, and the Castleton-Colborne Optimist Physical Education Award which is granted to an outstanding student pursuing an education in physical education or recreation