

# Halton cattle farmers hurting

By KAREN DALLIMORE

Norval beef farmer Harry Brander will lose \$400 an animal when he ships his next group of feedlot cattle, based on current market prices. On 200 head, that's \$80,000 gone. They'll be ready for market soon, and although Mr. Brander could hold them up a couple of weeks, he will probably ship them anyway because there's a chance the price could go even lower. "It's pretty depressing," he says. "I still have to feed them twice a day, no matter what happens."

Mr. Brander is greatly concerned about food safety, and he doesn't want any meat that isn't fit going into the food chain. However, his livelihood is currently under siege with the export restrictions and domestic wariness follow-

ing the finding of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), mad cow disease, in one cow in Alberta.

Brander says that his family will continue to eat beef. He has faith in the food-safety inspection system, and that may be a good thing because, with export markets curtailed, there will be a lot of Ontario beef to eat.

Most of the beef cattle raised in the province are exported: Last year nearly 52,000 of the 63,500 Ontario beef cattle were exported to the U.S. With the border closed, animals that are ready for the American market this year have nowhere to go.

Halton Region is home to 11,500 cattle, including both dairy and beef animals. The total cattle inventory for the province stands at

2,130,000 head.

Mr. Brander has a lot of the same questions that all of us do. Is it an isolated case? How did the cow get BSE? In Britain, feeding the protein of infected ruminants back to cattle fuelled the BSE outbreak. That practice has been banned in Canada since 1997. In the one other case of BSE that appeared in Red Deer, Alberta, in 1993, the animal had been imported from Britain in 1987, presumably carrying the infection. All animals associated with that one case were destroyed.

When he thinks about his barn full of cattle, Brander asks, "How can we get our borders open again and get back into business as usual?" In the best-case scenario, exports may only be stopped for a

few weeks. Unfortunately, says Mr. Brander, the damage has already been done, especially with American markets. He predicts that this catastrophe will put some cattle people out of business, and he worries that the U.S. may use the mad cow scare as an excuse to block or restrict exports.

One question that is also on his mind: Who will pay for the losses to farmers? There are presently no financial arrangements with the federal or provincial governments to deal with anything beyond compensation for depopulation or immediate slaughter requirements. Mr. Brander explains that negotiations with the federal government for a safety-net program, the Agricultural Policy Framework, are stalled, meaning that there is no

official program in place to help farmers affected by the catastrophe. "It really is just a wait-and-see thing."

Locally, fallout from the report of the BSE case hit the packing plants immediately, with layoffs at Better Beef in Guelph. Packers are only buying what they can ship domestically. Spin-off effects will continue to be tallied, but the temporary closing of the U.S. border to garbage shipments from Toronto was certainly not something that anyone could have predicted. The cattle business is not just about steaks and burgers: It involves secondary industries such as rendering, pet and animal feed, restaurants, and even pharmaceuticals and cosmetics.

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