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Border to re-open to Canadian cattle

By DONNA DANIELLI

Canadian livestock farmers' sigh of relief came close to turning into another gasp of despair as confirmation of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in an Alberta dairy cow came to light just hours before the announcement that the border would re-open to Canadian cattle in March. "We did have another cow with BSE and Canada told the US about it before the announcement that they were going to re-open the border," says local cattle farmer Harry Brander. "In the spirit of cooperation, they still went ahead with the announcement."

The Canadian cattle industry has been struggling to survive since the US closed its border nineteen months ago. This export ban is estimated to have cost Canadian farmers \$5 billion dollars. "It has been pure hell, frankly," stated Harry Brander. "Very nerve wracking and unsettling. We've lost a lot of money and I'm not sure if the beef trade will ever fully recover."

In recent days, another cow has been diagnosed with BSE, but the US government is holding firm to its commitment to open the border to cattle imports under thirty months old in March, 2005.

The announcement by the US Food and Drug Administration came as welcome news to Canadian farmers but is meeting mixed reactions on the other side of the border. Lobbying of the US Congress has already begun, as Congress must approve the re-opening of the border before the March 7 deadline. R-CALF USA, a group which represents US farmers has vowed to fight the re-opening, and warns that the US herd could be put at risk when Canadian cattle cross the border. R-CALF USA is threatening a court chal-



PHOTO BY NINA GUNBY

The US announcement that their borders are going to be re-opened to Canadian cattle is welcome news to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and the Canadian cattle industry, which has been struggling to survive since the borders closed nineteen months ago.

lenge to the re-opening if necessary.

A lawsuit has already been launched by the American Meat Institute, representing slaughterhouses, arguing that cattle entering the States should not be restricted to just those under 30 months. According to AMI, the May 2003 border closing has caused Canada to expand its slaughtering capacity by building new plants and adding shifts to existing plants. This has had a harsh impact economically on the US packers, who are experiencing short

cattle supplies and high prices for lean beef and calves.

"This will certainly help the viability of the industry in Canada," says Harry Brander. "And, hopefully it will help that we're getting our slaughtering capacity increased." Mr Brander does warn though, that more difficulty may lay in the future in transporting the cattle across the opened border. "Trucking companies have had to find other business in the last nineteen months, many are now trucking freight instead of live-

stock," he points out. "It'll be hard to get that sector back on line."

Still, Harry Brander, who also serves on the Executive of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, is quick to call the announcement opening the border once more, welcome news. "Overall, I'm very pleased with the opening of the border. We are still rated as a low risk country and both countries have worked together and come to the realization that it is really a North American market."

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