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Derby Brown

Playing the blame game won't help BSE situation

Just as Canada's livestock sector was beginning to see some light at the end of a very long, difficult year, officials from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) revealed the discovery of a dairy cow with BSE in Washington State.

That alone was bad enough, considering the North American nature of our beef industry. Then word came from the USDA that the dairy animal in question is believed to have come from a northern Alberta herd.

Dr. Brian Evans, chief veterinarian with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, fortunately isn't prepared to accept that assertion without a lot more evidence than a single ear tag. There are some critical questions about the origin of the animal that need to be answered, and we're told DNA tests should provide the answers.

Canada's livestock sector has learned a lot since the May 20 discovery of a beef cow with BSE in northern Alberta. Our scientific approach and knowledge have been refined considerably. We know Canadians continue to have faith in that science and the safety of Canadian beef, based on increased consumption and we know the rest of the world is coming to the same realization.

Farm organizations across

OFA Ron Bonnet Commentary

Canada have matured dramatically in the area of crisis management. We know that by working together and in partnership with government officials we can get the latest information into the hands of consumers and provide them with assurances about the safety of Canadian food.

Canada's livestock commodity organizations can be proud of the traceability features they have developed and implemented to help them give assurance of food safety, not only to Canadian consumers, but customers around the world.

Being able to trace animals and their food sources have become critical in the minds of today's sophisticated consumers.

Getting involved in a blame game scenario won't accomplish much for anyone in this current BSE situation, given our beef market has developed into a North American model. We need to concentrate on verification of the identity of the animal in question and examination of possible sources of

feed contamination either in our country or in the U.S.

Since 1997, it has been illegal for ruminant livestock feed materials to contain elements of livestock remains. This became law when the BSE outbreak in the United Kingdom resulted in the finding that feeding animal byproducts to other animals is a possible cause of BSE.

Political leaders, having lived through one BSE situation, are urging their cattle producers to stay calm and wait for all the facts to be revealed. Losses experienced with BSE so far this year are approaching two billion dollars for Canadian livestock producers. Staying calm now may not be that easy.

We have been able to get our provincial and federal governments to provide funding to help producers and others associated with our livestock sector survive the crisis that developed from the May 20th discovery of BSE.

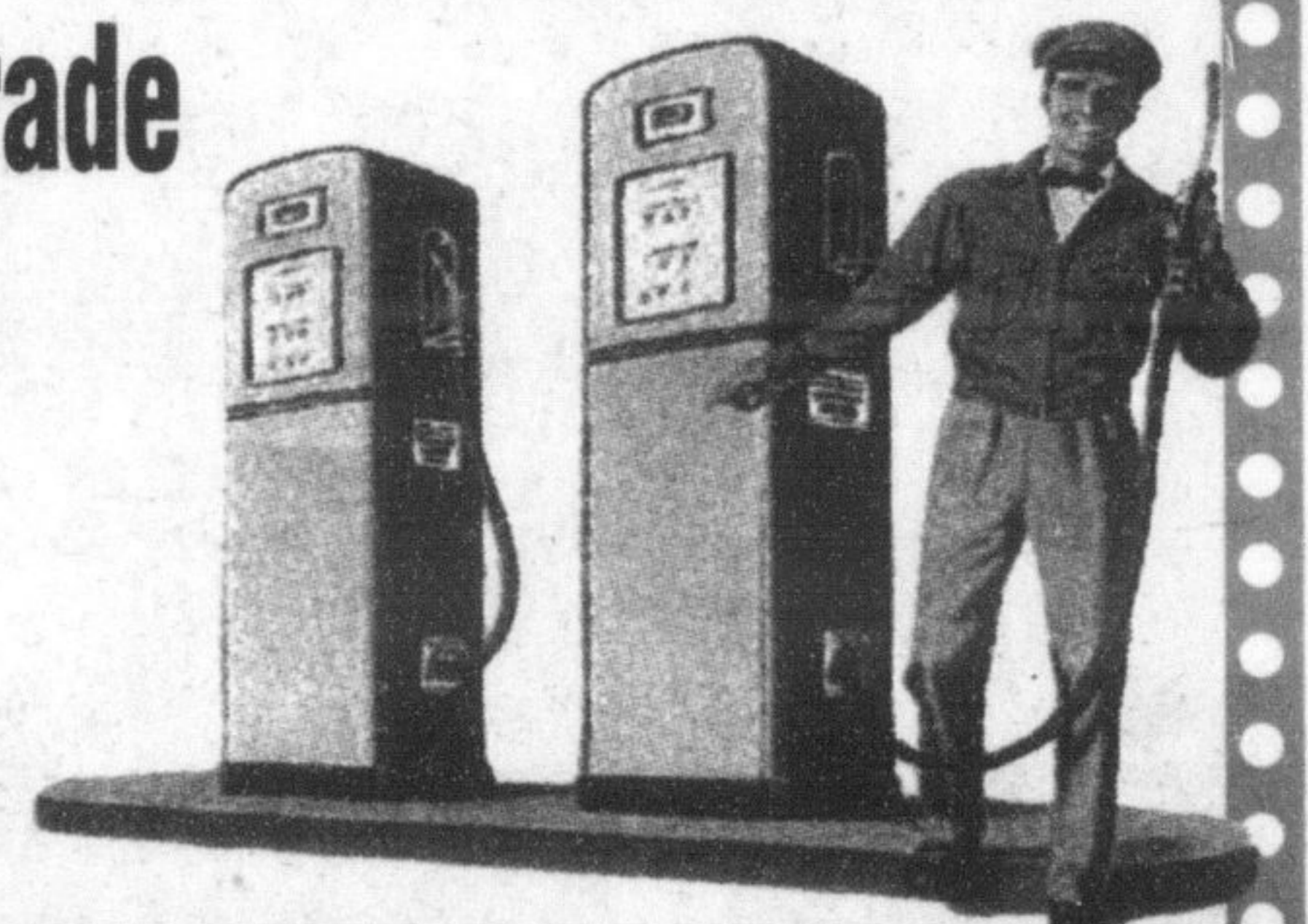
With the knowledge we have accumulated over the past seven months on BSE, and the advances we have accomplished in the international marketplace, we're moving close to a more scientific risk-based approach to dealing with BSE.

Ron Bonnet is president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

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