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NZ Farm Chief:US Consumers Unlikely To Panic Over Mad Cow

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

WELLINGTON (AP)--Seeking to reassure ranchers that their biggest export market wouldn't dry up, New Zealand's farm chief said Friday he thought Americans would keep eating beef despite a mad cow scare.

"While there might be a bit of a blip in terms of our exports to the United States, long term I'd be surprised if it does make a big difference," said Ian Corney, who heads the New Zealand Federated Farmers.

His comments followed independent confirmation by a British lab Thursday that a cow in Washington state had mad cow disease.

"The United States consumer doesn't strike me as a knee-jerk sort of person and so the reaction might not be as extreme as some fear," he told The Associated Press.

Sixty percent of New Zealand's beef exports go to the U.S., amounting to about NZ\$1.6 billion annually.

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Mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, eats holes in the brains of cattle. It ravaged Europe's cattle industry in 2001 and is thought to cause the fatal variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in humans who eat infected meat.

At least a dozen countries have slapped temporary bans on U.S. beef imports, including major markets like Japan and South Korea.

Corney said that might prove a boon for New Zealand beef exports which enjoyed a "clean-green" image. He added, however, that the recent strengthening of the New Zealand dollar - which would make exports more expensive - might also dent those gains.

New Zealand, which imports U.S. beef products but not fresh meat, hasn't imposed any bans.

A spokesman for the New Zealand Food Safety Authority said New Zealand assessed mad cow risks scientifically and described bans imposed by other countries as "a huge overreaction to the real risk."

-Edited by Tracy Gan

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