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UPDATE (2): US: Holstein With Mad Cow Disease From Canada

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

(Updates with comments from Canadian Cattlemen's Association.)

WASHINGTON (AP)--Investigators tentatively traced the first U.S. cow with mad cow disease to Canada, which could help determine the scope of the outbreak and might even limit the economic damage to the U.S. beef industry.

Dr. Ron DeHaven, the Agriculture Department's chief veterinarian, said Saturday that Canadian officials provided records indicating the sick Holstein was in a herd of 74 cattle shipped from Alberta, Canada, into the U.S. in August 2001 at Eastport, Idaho.

"These animals were all dairy cattle and entered the U.S. only about two or two-and-a-half years ago, so most of them are still likely alive," DeHaven said.

The sick cow's presence in that herd doesn't mean all 74 animals are infected, DeHaven said. Investigators will probably find where the other 73 animals are within a matter of days, he said. Finding them will help investigators determine if any other animals are sick and need to be tested.

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In May, Canada found a lone cow with the disease in Alberta but hasn't been able to determine the source of infection.

If U.S. and Canadian officials confirm that the sick cow in Washington state came from Canada, it might save the export market for the U.S. beef industry because the U.S. could keep its disease-free

status and continue trade.

Federal officials announced Tuesday that tests indicated the cow, which ended up at a Washington farm in October 2001, had mad cow, a brain-wasting illness. An international laboratory in the U.K. confirmed it Thursday.

Mad cow disease, known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is a concern because humans who eat brain or spinal matter from an infected cow can develop variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. In the U.K., 143 people died of it after an outbreak of mad cow in the 1980s.

Federal officials insist U.S. meat is safe because the brain, spinal cord and lower intestine - parts that carry infection - were removed from the cow before its meat was processed for human consumption.

Despite those assurances, more than two dozen countries banned U.S. beef this week. The U.S. lost 90% of its beef export market, industry officials say, and producers stand to lose up to \$6 billion a year in exports and falling domestic prices. Agriculture Department officials went Saturday to Japan, a top buyer that has banned U.S. beef, to discuss maintaining trade.

Connecting the infected cow to Canada could deal another blow to the Canadian beef industry, which has struggled since it found its case of mad cow last May. It lost \$1 million in beef trade a day as countries cut off beef imports.

Dr. Brian Evans, chief veterinary officer of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, emphasized that the cow's origins have yet to be confirmed. He noted that details on the cow's records in the U.S. don't match the ones kept in Canada.

Canadian papers show the cow had two calves before it was shipped to the U.S., which wasn't documented by U.S. officials.

Also, DeHaven said Canadian papers say the diseased cow was 6 1/2-years-old - older than U.S. officials had thought. U.S. records say the cow was 4- or 4 1/2-years-old.

Because of the discrepancies, Evans cautioned against "a premature conclusion that the definitive animal or definitive birth place has been located."

The age is significant because the animal may have been born before the U.S. and Canada in 1997 banned certain feed, which is considered the most likely source of infection.

"We probably have the largest two-way trade of beef and cattle of any two countries on earth," said Dennis Laycraft, executive vice-president of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association.

About 1.5 million cattle cross back and forth between the U.S. and Canada annually, in addition to millions of tons of feed, he added.

Laycraft stressed the importance of confirmed records before commenting on the possibility the suspect cow was from Alberta, Canada.

"Because of our experience last May, you don't want to jump on the data before it's finalized."

Cows get infected by eating feed which contains tissue from the spine or brain of an infected animal. Farmers used to feed their animals such meal to fatten them.

Although U.S. officials have maintained the food supply is safe, the government recalled an estimated 10,000 pounds of meat cut from the infected cow and from 19 other cows all slaughtered Dec. 9 at Vern's Moses Lake Meat Co., in Moses Lake, Washington.

Ken Petersen, of the department's Food Safety and Inspection Service, said, "It's too early to know how much of the product has been brought back, though we know that some of the product is beginning to be at least held at the retail facilities."

Officials say the slaughtered cow was deboned at Midway Meats in Centralia, Washington, and the meat was sent to two other plants in the region, identified as Willamette Valley Meat and Interstate Meat, both near Portland, Oregon.

Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration is trying to find out if the cow ate contaminated feed - a difficult task because the animal may have gotten the disease years before it appeared sick. The disease has an incubation period of four or five years.

Dr. Stephen Sundlof, head of the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine, said the agency is accounting for all of the byproducts rendered from the cow, including items like soap and soil nutrients.

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