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UPDATE:Canada Official:Mad Cow Link To Canada 'Premature'

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

(Updates throughout, adding that Evans saying cow may be from Edmonton, quotes on integration of North American beef market.)

TORONTO (AP)--It's too early to say whether the first cow in the U.S. found to have mad cow disease came from Canada, a top Canadian official said Saturday.

"It would be premature to draw such conclusions at this time," Dr. Brian Evans, chief veterinary officer of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, told reporters in Ottawa.

"What we're dealing with at this point in time is not full-bodied information," he said. "We want to be thorough, we want to be accurate...that's what the U.S. expects of us and that's what we expect of them."

Earlier Saturday, Dr. Ron DeHaven, the U.S. Agriculture Department's chief veterinarian, said 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.

Evans stressed the importance of determining when the suspect cow was born, noting that Canadian and U.S. records outlining the cow's history didn't match. He said the animal may have come from a farm north of Edmonton, Alberta, but gave no further details.

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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, 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.

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.

"Whatever the outcome (of the investigation)...we will work closely with U.S. and international colleagues to deal with what is clearly a North American and global issue."

Canada's beef industry suffered sharp declines after the discovery in May of a Black Angus cow infected with mad cow disease. Producers lost \$1.45 billion in exports, according to the Canada Beef Exporter Federation.

Canada's largest markets - 34 countries including the U.S., China, Japan, South Korea and Australia - swiftly issued a ban on all Canadian beef. The U.S. partially lifted its restrictions in September, but other countries have not shifted from their position.

"I don't think anybody should read this as tarnishing Canada as a mad cow haven," Evans said.

Canadian beef experts said given how many cattle cross between Canada and the U.S. - about 1.5 million annually - it is not surprising that Canada may be the source for the infected U.S. cow.

"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.

As well, millions of tons of feed also cross the borders.

Mad cow disease, or 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 Britain, 143 people died of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease after an outbreak of mad cow in the 1980s.

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