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Canada Confirms Feed Mislabeling, Says No Mad Cow Risk

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

OTTAWA (AP)--A Canadian federal official has confirmed mislabeling of animal feed from an Edmonton, Alberta, rendering plant suspected as being the producer of feed that resulted in two cases of mad cow disease.

But the incident was a one-time violation and didn't pose any risk of spreading BSE-infected material, said Sergio Tulusso, feed program co-ordinator with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Tulusso said Friday the case involved a cattle-feed product made from chicken feathers that was found to contain hogs hair.

Feathers and hogs hair are both considered safe as cattle feed, and they can be mixed, but in that case both ingredients are supposed to be marked.

He said the mislabeling was an isolated incident and didn't result in any penalty to Northern Alberta Processing which runs the plant and is a subsidiary of West Coast Reductions, based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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"People do make mistakes and have a bad day and that sort of thing," said Tulusso.

"If memory serves me...it may just have been a misunderstanding about how they were supposed to label this particular product."

Canada has 28 rendering plants with 25 inspectors responsible for making sure they are in compliance with federal law, said Tulusso.

He said there have been no charges leveled against any plant, and the agency relies on its ability to suspend licenses as a method of enforcement. But no licenses have been withdrawn either, to his knowledge.

Critics of Canada's feed rules say its complex rules on cattle feed create a significant risk that BSE infective materials could wind up being fed to cows.

The rules say that rendered offal and body parts from ruminant animals such as cows, deer and sheep cannot be fed to other ruminants. It is permitted to feed offal from non-ruminants such as pigs, horses and chickens to cattle.

One risk is that material not intended for cows will be mislabeled. Another risk is that the farmer will overlook the labels or ignore them.

Yet another possibility is that non-ruminants could carry the infective prions, or proteins, that spread mad cow disease even if they don't get sick themselves.

Thus, material from an infected cow could be fed to a chicken, the chicken could be fed to a cow and the cow could be infected indirectly.

That possibility is considered remote but it hasn't been ruled out, said Timothy Sly of Ryerson University in Toronto, an expert on mad cow disease.

"There's innumerable failings of the system," he said. "Every feed lot operator has at some time or another had wide-open avenues for stuff to be contaminated."

He said farmers and feed lot operators have many different kinds of feed for different species and the occasional mix-up is likely.

In Europe, these problems were judged so significant that governments have implemented a complete ban on the feeding of animal protein to other animals.

Tulusso said that such a ban would be costly, both because cattle producers would be deprived of feed from slaughterhouses, and because slaughterhouses would have to find other ways to dispose of offal unfit for humans.

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