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Canada Min Downplays Significance Of BSE Cow's Origin

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

TORONTO (AP)--Officials throughout Canada downplayed the significance of the origins of a cow that was found to have mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, in the U.S.'s Washington state, saying Monday that it wasn't confirmed that the sick animal came from a farm in Alberta.

"Finding out where the cow came from is only one aspect of an investigation. It's equally important to find out in fact where the feed came from that gave the cow BSE and also particularly where that cow contracted it," Agriculture Minister Bob Speller told a news conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

He also said it was essential to ensure proper tagging and slaughterhouse procedures were followed, and that Canada and the U.S. have begun separate DNA tests, but didn't know when results could be expected.

The remarks were his first since the U.S. Agriculture Department announced Saturday it believed the sick cow came from a farm north of Edmonton, Alberta.

Alberta Premier Ralph Klein was more frank in his comments earlier Monday, urging countries to resist "worldwide panic" and lift their bans on U.S. and Canadian beef due to the minimal risk of contracting BSE from one cow.

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He added that the U.S. Agriculture Department's announcement angered him because the North American beef market was too integrated for that distinction to matter.

"An American bull sniffing a Canadian cow doesn't ask for that cow's national identity," he told reporters in Calgary, Alberta. "I was frustrated to see that there was premature fingerprinting."

Canada's beef industry, particularly Alberta's with more than half of the country's 13.5 million cattle, suffered a huge blow after the discovery in May of a Black Angus cow infected with mad cow disease. Producers have lost US\$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 banned all Canadian beef. The U.S. partially lifted its restrictions in September, but other countries haven't.

BSE 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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